

LIFE-STUDY OF PHILEMON

MESSAGE ONE

A SLAVE REBORN TO BE A BROTHER

Scripture Reading: Philemon 1-16

I. THE SUBJECT OF THE BOOK

The subject of the book of Philemon is an illustration of the believers' equal status in the new man. In the new man all the believers, whether masters such as Philemon or slaves such as Onesimus, have the same status.

II. INTRODUCTION

The book of Philemon opens with the words, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon the beloved and our fellow-worker." In verse 2 Paul refers to Apphia the sister and to Archippus and to the church in Philemon's house. According to the family nature of this Epistle, Apphia must be Philemon's wife, and Archippus, his son. Philemon lived in Colosse (v. 2, see Col. 4:17; v. 10, see Col. 1:2; 4:9). According to history, he was an elder of the church in Colosse. It should be that the church in Colosse met in his house. Hence, it was the church in his house.

The introduction to this Epistle concludes with Paul's word in verse 3: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

III. A SLAVE REBORN TO BE A BROTHER

In verses 4 and 5 Paul goes on to say, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and to all the saints." Notice that in verse 5 Paul speaks first of love and then of faith. In the initial stage

faith came first, and then love was produced by faith (Gal. 5:6; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4). But here love is referred to first and then faith, because what is dealt with in this Epistle concerning the equal status of believers is a matter of love, which comes out of faith. In the new man the members love one another in faith (Titus 3:15). The relationship is of love through faith. The apostle appreciates the fellowship of Philemon's faith (v. 6) and is encouraged by his love (v. 7); thus he entreats him to receive Onesimus because of this love (v. 9). These two virtues are referred to in a combined way. Philemon has both of them, not only toward the Lord, but also toward all the saints.

In verse 6 Paul continues, "That the fellowship of your faith may become operative in the full knowledge of every good thing which is in us for Christ." This verse is actually the continuation of verse 4. Full knowledge here means full acknowledgment, entire appreciation, and experiential recognition. By "every good thing" Paul does not mean natural things (see Rom. 7:18), but spiritual and divinely good things, such as eternal life, the divine nature, and spiritual gifts, which are in us, the regenerated believers, not in natural men.

The Greek word rendered "for" in the phrase "for Christ" literally means unto, toward. All the spiritual and divinely good things in us are unto Christ, toward Christ, for Christ. The apostle prays that the fellowship, the communication, the sharing, of Philemon's faith toward all the saints may operate in them in the element and sphere of the full knowledge, the full realization, of all the good things in us for Christ, causing them to acknowledge, appreciate, and recognize all the spiritual and divinely good things which are in the believers for Christ.

In verse 7 Paul says, "For I had much joy and encouragement over your love, because the inward parts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." The word "for" introduces the reason the apostle prays for Philemon's faith to operate in the saints (v. 6). It is because his love has refreshed the inward Parts of the saints

and has hence rendered the apostle much joy and encouragement. The Greek word rendered refreshed also means soothed, cheered.

Verses 8 and 9 continue, "Wherefore, having much boldness in Christ to charge you what is fitting, because of love I rather entreat, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus." The Greek word for aged here may also be translated an ambassador (Eph. 6:20). Prisoner here and in verse 23, and bonds in verse 13, indicate that this Epistle was written during imprisonment, the apostle's first imprisonment in Rome.

In verses 10 and 11 Paul says, "I entreat you concerning my child whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me." During his imprisonment, Paul begot Onesimus through the Spirit with the eternal life of God (John 3:3; 1:13). In Greek the name Onesimus means profitable, useful, helpful; it was a common name for slaves. He was Philemon's purchased bondsman, who, according to Roman law, had no human rights. He ran away from his master, committing a crime which could bring the death penalty. While he was in prison at Rome with the apostle, he was saved through him. Now the apostle sends him back with this Epistle to his master.

The word useless in verse 11 also means not of service, profitless. This refers to Onesimus's running away from Philemon. The word useful also means of service, profitable. Onesimus became of service because he had been converted and was willing to return to Philemon.

Verse 12 continues, "Whom I have sent back to you--him, that is, my very heart." Literally, the Greek word for heart means bowels, as in verses 7 and 20; Philippians 1:8; 2:1; and Colossians 3:12. It signifies inward affection, tenderheartedness, compassions. Paul's inward affection and compassions went with Onesimus to Philemon.

Verses 13 and 14 say, "Whom I resolved to keep with myself, that on your behalf he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel, but without your mind I did not want

to do anything, that your goodness should not be as of necessity, but voluntary." Just as the Lord would not do anything without our consent, Paul would not keep Onesimus with him without Philemon's consent.

In verses 15 and 16 Paul says, "For perhaps therefore he was separated from you for an hour that you might fully have him forever, no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." The word "for" in verse 15 introduces the reason for the sending in verse 12. The word perhaps here is not only an expression of humility, but also one which shows no prejudice.

This short Epistle serves the special purpose of showing us the equality in eternal life and divine love of all the members in the Body of Christ. In the age of Paul the life of Christ had annulled, among the believers, the strong institution of slavery. Since the sentiment of the love of the Christian fellowship was so powerful and prevailing that the evil social order among fallen mankind was spontaneously ignored, any need for institutional emancipation was obviated. Because of the divine birth and living by the divine life, all the believers in Christ had equal status in the church, which was the new man in Christ, with no discrimination between free and bond (Col. 3:10-11). This is based on three facts. First, Christ's death on the cross has abolished the ordinances of the different ways of life for the creation of the one new man (Eph. 2:15). Second, we all have been baptized into Christ and made one in Him without any difference (Gal. 3:27-28). Third, in the new man Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11). Such a life with such a love in equal fellowship is well able to maintain good order in the church (in Titus), carry out God's economy concerning the church (in 1 Timothy), and stand against the tide of the church's decline (in 2 Timothy). It is of the Lord's sovereignty that this Epistle was positioned after the three preceding books in the arrangement of the New Testament.

According to Paul's word in verse 16, Onesimus was

above a slave, or more than a slave. He was even more than a free man; he was a beloved brother.

There are a number of intimate terms in this Epistle: a beloved brother, the sister (v. 2), the beloved and our fellow-worker (v. 1), our fellow-soldier (v. 2), my fellow-workers (v. 24), my fellow-prisoner (v. 23), and a partner (v. 17). These terms indicate the intimate sentiment in the apostle concerning his relationship with the fellow members in the new man.

The expression "both in the flesh and in the Lord" means in the flesh as a slave and in the Lord as a brother; in the flesh a brother for a slave, and in the Lord a slave for a brother.

The title of this message is "A Slave Reborn to Be a Brother." Only through the preaching of the gospel could a slave like Onesimus be reborn to be a brother. Paul did not preach the gospel to Onesimus in an ordinary way or in a careless, superficial way. Paul preached the gospel to him while he was a prisoner in Rome. This indicates that no matter what kind of situation Paul was in, he was always exercised to carry on the preaching of the gospel. He says, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that the things concerning me have turned out rather to the advancement of the gospel, so that my bonds have become manifest in Christ in the whole praetorium and to all the rest." Nero's royal guard heard Paul preaching the gospel and even saw him preaching the gospel. Philippians 4:22 indicates that certain members of Caesar's household were saved: "All the saints greet you, and especially those of Caesar's household." Now we know from the Epistle to Philemon that the slave Onesimus was saved through Paul.

Paul did not preach the gospel to Onesimus in the way practiced by most Christians today. Paul regarded his gospel preaching as an act of begetting. For this reason, Paul refers to Onesimus as his child begotten in his bonds. Paul's preaching involved a process of begetting and giving birth to a child. This indicates that in his preaching of the gospel Paul ministered the divine life into others. The

eternal life of God imparted into Onesimus caused him to be reborn as Paul's spiritual child and brother in Christ. When we preach the gospel today, we also must preach in the way of begetting, in the way of imparting Christ as the divine life into those to whom we preach the gospel.

Furthermore, after begetting this child, Paul did no neglect him or leave him as an orphan in the care of others. Because this child was so dear to him, Paul kept him and loved him. He even referred to him as "my very heart." Mothers often feel this way toward their child. If the child were taken away from them, it would seem as if the mother's heart had been snatched away. Do you have this kind of feeling concerning one whom you have brought to the Lord? Probably we do not have much of this kind of feeling. However, Paul considered Onesimus not only his child, but also his heart. For Paul to send his child to Philemon meant that he also sent his heart to him. What concern we see here!

There are some parents who do not regard their children in the flesh as their own heart. They may say within themselves, "God has given me this child, and it is my duty to take care of him. In this matter I have no choice." Often Christians who bring others to the Lord have a similar attitude. In contrast to Paul, they lack a deep parental concern for the one saved through them.

Although Paul had such a loving concern for his child, he realized that he was not the right person to keep him. Because Onesimus was a slave who had escaped from his master, he had to return. It is possible that Onesimus had stolen something from Philemon. Verse 18 may indicate this: "And if he has wronged you in anything or owes anything, charge that to my account." Onesimus may not merely have pilfered things from Philemon; he may have stolen something precious.

Here we see that Paul's concern was that the human relationship between Onesimus and Philemon would be rectified. After we have brought a sinner to the Lord, we should first regard him as our spiritual child and then help

him to rectify his relationships. For example, if one has wronged his parents, we should help him to be reconciled to his parents. If a wife is wrong with her husband, or a husband with his wife, we should help the wife or husband to restore the proper relationship with the spouse. This is an important principle.

In sending back this escaped slave to his master, Paul, an excellent writer, appealed to Philemon's love. In verses 5 and 6 Paul says, "Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and to all the saints, that the fellowship of your faith may become operative in the full knowledge of every good thing which is in us for Christ." Because in this Epistle Paul is appealing to Philemon's love, he puts love before faith in verse 5.

Verse 6 is difficult to understand. Here Paul seems to be saying, "When the brothers in different localities learn of what you did in love through faith and have fellowship regarding your faith, your faith will work in them. It will become operative in them in the full knowledge of every good thing which is in us for Christ, because all believers have the same good things within them." These good things include the divine life, the divine nature, and the divine gifts. A full record of these things is found in the three books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. All these good things in us are for Christ. The fellowship of Philemon's faith may be likened to a fan with which we fan into flame for Christ all the good things within us (2 Tim. 1:6). When the saints hear what Philemon did in love, the good deposit within them will be stirred up. This is the operation of the faith of a certain saint through the fellowship among the believers.

In the book of Philemon we have an excellent pattern and example of bringing a sinner to the Lord through begetting him with the divine life; regarding him as a child, even as our heart; and helping him to rectify all the human relationships. In the churches in the Lord's recovery it is our practice to send back the escaped one and the divorced or separated wife or husband. We want to help

rectify all human relationships. In doing this, we must have a loving concern and appeal to the love of the other party. Finally, in keeping with Paul's example in this Epistle, we must help the newly saved one to come into the church life. Paul's desire was to bring Onesimus into the church life. Having been begotten by Paul, Onesimus was now a slave reborn to be a brother. As the one who had begotten him, Paul bore the responsibility to bring Onesimus into the church life, into the fellowship among the members of the Body.

LIFE-STUDY OF PHILEMON

MESSAGE TWO

A BROTHER RECOMMENDED FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE NEW MAN

Scripture Reading: Philemon 17-25

The subject of the book of Philemon is an illustration of the believers' equal status in the new man. Apparently this Epistle does not say anything concerning the status of the believers. Actually, this book touches the heart of this matter.

When Paul wrote to Philemon, Philemon was in Colosse and Paul was far away, a prisoner in Rome. One of his co-prisoners, Onesimus, was brought to the Lord and begotten by Paul in the Spirit to become not only a believer in Christ and a child of God, but also a dear child to Paul himself. Since there was a church in Rome, why did Paul not recommend this newly saved one to the local church there? Paul did not do this, because Onesimus was a runaway slave and his master, Philemon, lived in Colosse.

The fact that there were churches in Rome and in Colosse indicates that the churches as the expression of the Body of Christ are universal. This was true in ancient times just as it is true today. The first church, the church in Jerusalem, came into existence approximately 34 or 35 A.D. The Epistle to Philemon was written about thirty years later. Even during the comparatively short time of thirty years, churches had been established not only in Judea, but also in the Gentile world. Thus, the church was universal. This was according to the Lord's sovereignty to carry out the commission He had given to Paul. It also was the fulfillment of Paul's desire to see a new man on earth.

By the spreading of the Roman Empire the various

nations and peoples around the Mediterranean Sea were brought into contact with one another and were even unified politically. There was a great deal of traffic and communication between people in various parts of the empire. This communication was altogether related to the old man. But at the time Paul wrote to Philemon, another man had come into existence on earth. In the midst of the old man, the new man had come into being. This is fully revealed in Colossians 3:10 and 11: "And having put on the new man, which is being renewed unto full knowledge according to the image of Him Who created him; where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all and in all." Philemon was an elder of the church in Colosse. In the Epistle to the Colossians Paul emphasized that all the believers are part of the new man. Furthermore, in the new man there cannot be Greek and Jew, slave and freeman. Philemon was a freeman, and Onesimus was his bondservant. But in the new man they were of equal status.

In Colossians 4 we have a record of the fellowship of the new man. Colossians 4:9 speaks of Onesimus, and verse 17, of Archippus, the son of Philemon. A freeman and a slave who were members of the same household were also part of the church as the new man.

The Epistle to Philemon should be regarded as a continuation of Colossians 4 and considered an illustration of how in the new man all social rank is put aside. In the previous message we pointed out that this short Epistle serves the special purpose of showing us the equality in eternal life and divine love of all the members in the Body of Christ. The distinction of social rank and status among the believers is nullified not by an outward legal act, but by an inward change of constitution. Ranks have been abolished because the believers have been constituted of Christ's life. Christ's life had been constituted into Philemon, and the same life with the same divine element had been constituted into his slave, Onesimus. According

to the flesh, Philemon was a master and was free, and Onesimus was a slave and was not free. But according to the inner constitution, both were the same. Because of the divine birth and a living by the divine life, all the believers in Christ have equal status in the church, which is the new man in Christ, with no discrimination between free and bond.

In Titus 2:9-15 Paul charges the slaves to behave well in the social system of slavery. He instructed them to live a Jesusly human life in the midst of such a social system. But in the Epistle to Philemon he gives the churches an illustration of how slaves and masters alike have been reconstituted of the life of Christ. As a result, they all are part of the new man. In the old social system, which belongs to the living of the old man, the distinction between master and slave exists. Paul did not touch this social system in the way of trying to reform it. On the contrary, on the one hand he instructed the slaves to live a Jesusly human life under this social system; on the other hand, he illustrated how both slaves and masters are brothers in the Lord and, as members of the new man, share the same status.

Philemon 16 makes this relationship very clear. Concerning Onesimus Paul says, "No longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." Through regeneration Onesimus had become more than a slave and even more than a free man, for he had become a beloved brother. Now Onesimus had a relationship with Philemon "both in the flesh and in the Lord": in the flesh as a slave and in the Lord as a brother. In the flesh Onesimus was a brother as a slave, and in the Lord he was a slave as a brother. Philemon, therefore, had to receive Onesimus and embrace him in a loving, intimate way. Of course, he was to receive him not in the old man, the old social system, but in Christ and in the new man. Although Onesimus was still Philemon's slave, in Christ he had become Philemon's brother. Now, in the new man,

Philemon had to receive Onesimus as a brother and one of equal status. Here we see Paul's recommendation of a brother for acceptance in the new man.

In the book of Philemon there is no mention of the expression "the new man." But as we examine the situation portrayed in this book, we see that Paul was recommending a brother not to a local church in the city where he was at the time, but to a local church in a remote city. This indicates that Paul's recommendation took place within the sphere of the new man. As we have already indicated, this can be proved by Colossians 3:11, where we are told that in the new man there is no bond or free. As Paul was writing to Philemon, he may have been thinking something like this: "Onesimus has become a dear brother in the Lord. Now I wish to recommend him, a slave, to a brother who is a free man. I want to help them both realize that as brothers they are equal. One should be received, and the other must be willing to receive him." This is what I mean in saying that the Epistle to Philemon is an illustration of the equal status of the believers in the new man.

As long as we see that the believers have an equal status in the new man, there will be no problems among us concerning social rank, nationality, or race. We shall have no problems with different peoples. Those who discriminate among people in any way do not practice the proper church life. If we would have the genuine church life, we must receive all the saints regardless of race, nationality, or social rank. It is a fact that in many places believers are not willing to do this. As a result, they cannot have the proper church life.

We should never speak of a church according to race or color--there is no white church, yellow church, black church, or brown church. The church has only one color, and that color is heavenly blue. After you come into the church life, there must not be deep in your being any discrimination between believers on the basis of race or color. As long as such a discrimination exists within you, as far as you are concerned, you are nullifying the church life.

The colors which represent the different races have already been nullified by the cross. Now we must be willing to pay the price to have them nullified in the real and genuine church life.

In society distinctions are still made on the basis of color, nationality, or social status. But no such distinctions can exist in the church, in the new man. The old man has been divided by these distinctions. But in the new man distinctions on the basis of color have been nullified. Paul strongly taught this, and we must consider it part of the full knowledge of the truth.

Again and again we have pointed out that in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus the full knowledge of the truth concerns the content of God's New Testament economy concerning Christ and the church. If we still make distinctions on the basis of color, race, or nationality, in this matter we are reprobate concerning the truth. We do not hold the full knowledge of the truth.

As a Jew, it was not easy for Paul to say that in the new man there cannot be any Jews. But because this was part of the full knowledge of the truth, he declared it plainly and taught it clearly. According to the full knowledge of the truth, in the universe there is one new man, one Body of Christ, and one church of God. Furthermore, there should be only one local church in a locality. We all need to realize this aspect of the truth.

According to the Lord's sovereignty, the Epistle to Philemon was written before the Epistles to Timothy and Titus. But in the arrangement of the books in the New Testament, Philemon was placed at the end of this group of four books. These books reveal the practice of God's New Testament economy, and Philemon shows us a particular aspect of that practice.

In the practice of the economy of God, it is crucial that all social ranks and differences among races and nations are swallowed up. If these ranks and distinctions are allowed to exist in the church life, the new man will be nullified, and the proper church life will be destroyed. How

wonderful that in the New Testament there is a little book which tells us about a slave who was brought to the Lord and brought into the church life! If this book had told us that Caesar Nero had been saved, I would not appreciate it as much. But this book tells that a slave, one regarded by the Roman social system as little more than an animal with no legal rights, was saved. Some may think that it was not worthwhile for Paul to even write about him. Others may say that it is sufficient for a slave to be saved and to have the assurance of heaven. Paul, however, exercised great wisdom in writing this Epistle. Never has there been another letter written in this way.

Why did Paul exercise such a loving concern over a slave who had been saved? He did so because he was burdened to illustrate that among all the saints and all the local churches, the believers are equal in the new man. Onesimus and Philemon are a good illustration of this equality. Surely it was sovereign of God that Onesimus was saved in prison through Paul. It was the salvation of Onesimus that afforded Paul the opportunity to give such a marvelous illustration concerning the life of the new man. He could point out that a slave, then in Rome, and his master, far away in Colosse, were equal as believers in the new man.

Paul knew that, for the sake of his conscience, he had to care for Onesimus in a proper way. Paul knew Philemon and his family very well. Perhaps Paul said to himself, "Now Philemon's slave has been saved through me. What shall I do with him? Shall I send him back to his master? And what shall I say to Philemon about Onesimus?" Actually, this was a very important matter, arranged sovereignly by the Lord. No other illustration could better portray the nullification of the difference of status in the new man. The case of Onesimus and Philemon illustrates to the uttermost that in the new man all the believers have an equal status. Oh, it is crucial that we see this! Praise the Lord for the salvation of Onesimus, and praise the Lord for this illustration of our equal status in the new man!

I. THE APOSTLE'S RECOMMENDATION

In verse 17 Paul says to Philemon regarding Onesimus, "If then you hold me as a partner, receive him as myself." The use of the word partner here indicates the deep relationship of fellowship in the Lord. Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself. A local church with its elders is in partnership with the Lord, and the Lord entrusts the newly saved ones to them just as the good Samaritan entrusted the one he had rescued to the innkeeper (Luke 10:33-35).

II. THE APOSTLE'S PROMISE

In verses 18 and 19 Paul continues, "And if he has wronged you in anything or owes anything, charge that to my account; I Paul have written with my own hand, I will repay; not to say to you that you owe me even your own self besides." The phrase, "if he has wronged you in anything or owes anything," indicates that Onesimus may have defrauded his master. Concerning this, Paul says, "Charge that to my account." In caring for Onesimus, Paul did exactly what the Lord does for us. In verse 19 Paul says, "I will repay," just as the Lord pays everything for His redeemed.

In verse 19 Paul also reminds Philemon, "You owe me even your own self besides." This indicates that Philemon had been saved through Paul himself.

III. THE APOSTLE'S REQUEST AND CONFIDENCE

In verse 20 Paul goes on to say, "Yes, brother, may I have profit from you in the Lord; refresh my inward parts in Christ." The Greek word for profit here, *onaimen*, is an allusion to the name Onesimus. This is a play on words implying that since Philemon owed Paul even himself, he was an Onesimus to Paul. Hence, Philemon should be profitable to Paul in the Lord.

In this verse Paul also asks Philemon to refresh his inward parts in Christ. The word for refresh means soothe, cheer. Literally, the Greek word rendered inward parts

means bowels, as in verse 7. Since Philemon refreshed the inward parts of the saints, his partner asks him now to do the same for him in the Lord.

In verses 21 and 22 Paul says, "Having confidence in your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say. And at the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be graciously given to you." Paul's expectation that he would be liberated from his imprisonment and visit the churches again is also expressed in Philippians 1:25 and 2:24. Paul considered his visit a gracious gift to the church.

IV. THE CONCLUSION

In verses 23 through 25 we have the conclusion of this Epistle: "Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you; as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." The apostle always greeted the recipients of his Epistles, both in the opening and in the conclusion, with the grace of the Lord. This shows that he trusted in the Lord's grace for them, as well as for himself (1 Cor. 15:10), to accomplish what he wrote to them. No human effort avails for the accomplishment of such a high revelation as the completing revelation of the Apostle Paul.