

Title: PHILEMON: A Brother Restored
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By Ray C. Stedman

To me, one of the exciting things about Bible study is to find all the hidden secrets that the Lord has put into the pages of scripture. And it can get as exciting as a detective story. If you try tracing down some of the clues that are given to you in scripture, all kinds of amazing things begin to come out. I hope you are learning to discover this for yourself in scripture, because it adds so much excitement.

I think this little book of Philemon is perhaps one of the most fascinating stories of this type of anything found in the pages of the New Testament. I wonder if you found any of these clues and the story developed before your eyes as it did for me. Perhaps when you read this little book through as I hope many of you did this afternoon, you wondered why this book is in the Bible. After all, it is unique in the sense that it is the only private letter we have in the apostle's hand. All the other letters he wrote to churches or to young men who were pastors of churches. And they concerned the business and the doctrines and the heresies that were being faced and so on. But in this letter there is no doctrine brought out at all, there is no heretical problem to encounter or to oppose, there is nothing but just an account of a problem that Paul had connected with a certain man and it is a private letter of the apostle's to this man named Philemon. Well, why is it in Scripture, then? What do we learn particularly from this letter?

Well I suggest that we trace some of the clues down and if we do, it might help us in this and as we do we might find something very fascinating about this little letter. It has an unusual number of names in it for such a short

letter, and these names I think will help us a great deal. It starts out,

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker, and Apphia, our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

{Phmn 1:1-3 RSV}

Now Bible scholars tell us that this letter was written at the same time that Paul wrote the letter to Colossians and the letter to Ephesians. Both of which were written from Rome at the time that he was a prisoner on his first imprisonment in Rome recounted for us in the close of the book of Acts. And you recall that he was in a hired house where he had freedom to have his friends come in to see him and could send out messengers to them and messengers through them though he was chained day and night to a Roman soldier but he had to stay in his own hired house. And it was during this time that he wrote these letters.

Now most people feel—most Bible scholars feel—that Philemon lived perhaps in the city of Colossae because he is associated with the church of that name and it was written at the same time that the letter to Colossians was written. But there is a very interesting suggestion here that centers around this young man Archippus. As you read this letter through you'll see that Philemon was evidently a rather wealthy man, a man who had certain servants, slaves that did his bidding, and Apphia was doubtless his wife, whom Paul calls his sister,

and most scholars feel that Archippus was their son, and Paul refers to him as “our fellow soldier.” But the letter is also addressed to the church which met in their house. And that’s a little glimpse into New Testament church life. Here was a gathering of Christians. And the church met in their house. Now this could be the church of the Colossians to which the other letter is written but there are certain things that suggest that perhaps this is a different group. And it is interesting that this man Archippus is also referred to in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. If you want to turn back to that in the closing verses of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he says to them,

Give my greetings (in verse 15) to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you (Colossians), have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry which you have received of the Lord."

{Col 4:15-17}

Now, when we talked about the church in the letter to the Colossians, I pointed out that we have no record of the letter written to the church at Laodicea, though there are some who feel it may be what we call the letter to the Ephesians. But there is another possibility. Since Archippus is mentioned here in connection with Laodicea, there is a possibility at least that Philemon lived in Laodicea which was a city very close to Colossae—only a few miles away. And that when Paul wrote to the Colossians here and asked them to read the letter and to have the letter read in Laodicea, he added this special word for Archippus: “Tell Archippus to fulfill his ministry,” because as a fellow soldier (which he calls him in the letter to Philemon) it suggests that he was in some sense perhaps a pastor of the church that met in the house of Philemon in Laodicea. Furthermore, he says, that the letter to Laodicea should be read to the church of Colossae. This suggests that perhaps this letter to Philemon is the letter to Laodicea. And that therefore it was a matter to be brought before all the churches. Well, that’s one clue. Let’s see what else is mentioned here.

Reading on a little further, skipping down to verse ten, you’ll notice that the theme of this letter gathers around a runaway slave named Onesimus. In verse ten Paul says to Philemon, “I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.” That means Paul led him to Christ. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.” This is a very encouraging verse to me, because it indicates that the apostle delighted in puns because there is a pun in this verse. I’m often accused of indulging in the lowest form of humor, punning. But Paul did, too. And here it is: the word “Onesimus” means useful. And so after he refers to Onesimus he adds this little pun. Formerly, he admits, he was useless. But now he’s really fulfilling his name—he’s become “Onesimus” to you. He’s become useful to you and to me. Then he goes on,

I’m sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own free will. Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever. No longer as a slave, but more than a slave. As a beloved brother especially to me but now much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

{Phmn 1:12-16 RSV}

Now that tells us something interesting about Onesimus. I think it’s quite evident from this verse that Onesimus was Philemon’s brother, his literal blood brother. They were sons of the same parents. And at the same time he had been Philemon’s slave. Now this was not uncommon or impossible in the Roman Empire. Roman writers tell us that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. Fifty percent of the population were slaves. And because such a tremendous proportion of the population were slaves, the ruling classes thought it was very necessary to treat them with great severity. And a slave who ran away was almost certain to lose his life if he was caught and returned to his owner. And the only way that

the Romans thought that they could keep this vast population of slaves under subjection and prevent a widespread rebellion and revolt was to have very severe laws that would be put into full effect the minute any one of these slaves stepped over the line. We see something perhaps somewhat similar to this in South Africa today [this course was recorded originally in 1968—ed.] in the rigid laws unto which the colored people live in South Africa and are kept under rigid control so that they do not dare step over the line in any way.

Here was a man who evidently had fallen perhaps into economic debt to his brother. And, as often happens, in order to pay the debt he became a slave to his own brother. Now doubtless this happened before Philemon became a Christian. But as you put the story together, Onesimus must have tired of this relationship and one day he helped himself to some of his brother's goods. He got enough money to take off for Rome. And there in Rome, perhaps to his amazement, he ran across the apostle Paul. At any rate, they met in Rome. And Paul led this young man to Christ. And having led him to Christ he now learned that he was a former slave of his master Philemon and his blood brother and it's this that prompts this letter to be written.

Now this meant that if Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he was putting his life at stake. That is if Philemon chose to exercise his rights because as I'd suggested the Romans were very cruel in their treatment of slaves. One Roman writer records the fact that a slave was bringing a tray load of goblets—crystal goblets—into his master and he happened to slip and one of the goblets fell off and smashed upon the pavement and immediately his master ordered him to be thrown into a fountain of water where he was torn apart by some savage eels that lived there. And this was the way they treated slaves in those days. And Paul therefore is forcing the issue here by sending Onesimus back to Philemon. But it's accompanied by this gracious and charming letter in which he pleads earnestly for this man's life and reminds him that he does not come back now only as a slave but as a brother in Christ as well as his brother in the flesh.

Well now what kind of a man is Philemon? Well as you look at this letter in verse 4-7 there is a wonderful picture drawn of this man. We read,

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ, for I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

{Phmn 1: 4-7 RSV}

That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Here's a man who evidently is a very gracious and generous person, and Paul commends him for this sharing which his faith prompts, that is the generosity and the charity that he manifests and he remembers him with great joy because of the many times that he's heard reports of how Christians traveling through have been blessed and refreshed and strengthened by this man.

Now, putting all these factors together I think we get some clues as to why this letter is here in the Bible. When we recall the fact that the fifty percent of the Roman Empire were slaves and that the Christian gospel is directed toward freedom, freedom for men at all levels of life, it would be simply impossible to think of having a tremendous message of declaring the greatness of the gospel which God has provided that does not somewhere touch upon this question of slavery. This has often been a problem to many people.

I find today that when the racial issues are now so hot and turbulent in our country that many are raising this question. Why doesn't the New Testament say something about this? Why didn't the apostle Paul condemn this institution of slavery with its terrible abuses and its awful injustices? And if we today can get stirred up over the fact that Negroes and others are second-class citizens as they certainly are in many parts of our country, then certainly the apostles themselves ought to have said something against this terrible institution of slavery. And yet when you read the letter to the Colossians and the Ephesians which were written at the same time as this letter here, you'll find passages in both of

those that exhort slaves to be obedient to their masters and not to revolt and not to rise up and not to try to undermine them but to be faithful in their service and to obey them and to serve them with singleness of heart as unto the Lord.

Well what does this mean? I think we have here a most helpful passage to show us how to handle problems that arise of this nature. Here, in other words, is kind of a test case which the apostle has been led in the Spirit of God to set before us for the benefit of the whole church through all the centuries that would follow. And it is brought out in Philemon's case because of the extremely favorable situation that prevailed. Here is a man who was a Christian, a gracious, generous, open-hearted, forgiving, type of individual and the man who was his slave was his own blood brother. So that surely here is the case of all cases where the apostle could thrust a wedge into the heart of this terrible institution of slavery and this is what he does.

Now notice how Christianity handles a problem like this. First, it never encourages direct revolt. We're being told today that the job of the church is to encourage people who are mistreated and injusticed to rise up and revolt and to demonstrate and to refuse to work and to strike and all these things but you never find a whisper of that kind of thing in the New Testament. Why? Because the New Testament always works it out on a spiritual level. And it indicates that a new principle has come in to establish a new relationship.

Here's this man who was a runaway slave who is now a brother in Christ. And Paul sends him back to his master with a confident expectation that he'll treat him as a Christian ought to treat any other Christian. Because in Christ there is neither bond nor free. There is neither male nor female, all differences are abolished in Christ. And men and women, slaves and masters, rich and poor are all one alike before the son of God. And that principle interjected into human society eventually abolished slavery in the Roman Empire without overturning it in its economic basis.

But notice also Christianity never says to a runaway slave, "Look, forget about the past. Never mind the fact that you once were a slave. Just go out and enjoy yourself anyhow. Don't worry about the past; just take care of the

future." Christianity doesn't say that. What it said to this slave was, "Look, go back and face the past. Go back and face your master. Clear this thing up right and trust that the God who called you and won you and saved you will be with you to work this whole thing out." And then as Paul so beautifully puts it, writing to Philemon,

If he has wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

{Phmn 1:18, 19 RSV}

So the fourth principle by which the apostle indicates the church had handled problems like this is that it is to be in full accord with the principles of Christian life. Another pays the price. We share the burden one with another. There is no blame attached.

And finally you'll notice that the whole church is involved in this. The letter is written not merely to Philemon but to the church that is in his house. And this was obviously intended to be a test case though the decision was to be a private one which Philemon was to make. Nevertheless the whole church was to be informed as to what was done and this letter was to be read at the church at Colossae as well and thus the ball started rolling that finally, gathering momentum, rolled over this terrible thing and flattened this institution of slavery until it was eliminated from the Roman Empire. That's the reason why this letter is in the New Testament.

Now there's an interesting thing here in closing. History tells us that fifty years later a man by the name of Ignatius who was the bishop of Antioch, one of the early church fathers, was making his way as a prisoner from Antioch to Rome in order to be martyred for the gospel of Christ. And on his journey he wrote several letters to encourage the churches that he knew which are still extant, are still available to us. He wrote one to the church of Smyrna that's mentioned in the book of Revelation. And he wrote another to the church in Ephesus and he addressed it to the Bishop of Ephesus.

And who do you think the Bishop of Ephesus was? Yes, you guessed it: Onesimus. And the interesting thing is that Bishop Ignatius

makes the same pun over Onesimus' name that the apostle Paul does. He, too, refers to him as one who is both profitable in name as well as in nature. But it looks very clear that it is highly likely—there is the possibility of course they were men of the same name, uh, two different men, but it is very likely that Onesimus here did return with his letter to Philemon and in full accord with the apostle's eager desire here, Philemon sent his brother free as a slave, welcomed him back, and he became a leader in the church at Laodicea and later became the bishop or the prominent pastor of the church at Ephesus. And it was this letter that set this man free that was thus included in the scriptures in order that slavery might be abolished in whatever form it manifests itself wherever the spirit of Christianity come.

Now one other thing. Where do you think the letters of the first testament were first gathered together, or as you know these letters for a while were sent here and there as the Apostle and others wrote them and they traveled. Some churches had some letters and some did not. But the first gathering together of all the letters of the New Testament took place in Ephesus where Onesimus was the bishop. And if we put all these things together, it seemed highly likely—if your imagination runs riot like mine does, that Bishop Onesimus was the one who said, "Brethren, you can put every other letter you want in here but let's include this one to Philemon. That's the one that set me free."

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the impact that your word has had in the history of this world and in the lives of men and women throughout history. We thank you for this little letter which breathes such charity, such love, such joy, which is so filled with charm and wit, which still speaks to us with all the warmth and glory of that first century day. We thank you for what it reflects, the spirit of love and grace which sought us out like Onesimus, runaway slaves that we were, found us, paid the price for us, set us free that we might be men and women able to live in the freedom and liberty of the children of God and for this our hearts reflect our gratitude and we give thanks in Christ's name. Amen.