

BROTHERS IN CHRIST

Philemon

While Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote this very brief, tender, beautiful, significant and charming letter to his dear friend, Philemon, whose name it bears. This letter sheds a beautiful light on the character of the writer, indicating that he was a thoughtful, ethical and devoted personal friend of Philemon, in whom the Apostle had implicit confidence. In this letter Paul also set forth what grace does for the sinner.

As was typical of Paul, he included Timothy in the salutation of the epistle which he addressed to Philemon, to Apphia, who was probably Philemon's wife, to Archippus, who was likely their son, and to the church in the house of Philemon. In concluding the salutation, Paul expressed his desire that those whom he named therein might be the recipients of grace and peace from God the Father and Christ the Son.

I. The Recommendation.

Paul's opening statements revealed his deep appreciation of and thanksgiving for Philemon's hospitality, love, fellowship and faith. Paul was grateful for Philemon's faith in Christ and his love for the Christians. These things were demonstrated in his dedicated Christian life and by his entertainment of the saints in his home and by his befriending them in so many ways. Paul graciously expressed his gratitude to Philemon for his noble Christian character. He also informed him that he continually prayed for him.

All that we know about Philemon is what is revealed in Paul's letter to him. It is reasonable to assume that he was a native and a resident of Colosse in Phrygia. Evidently he was introduced to Christ by Paul during the ministry of the Apostle in Ephesus. The ties of love which bound them together ever after were a constant source of joy and comfort to Paul.

Philemon was in comfortable circumstances, at least, and perhaps a man of wealth, because his house was large enough to provide ample room for holding the regular church services there. Through the centuries true Christians have counted it a joy to open their homes for the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Doubtless he gave self and substance cheerfully and generously in the service of Christ, but it is entirely possible that Philemon rendered his greatest service to the cause of Christ through the proper use of his material blessings.

This well-to-do man owned one or more slaves. The name of the slave mentioned in this letter was Onesimus. From Paul's language one would conclude that Onesimus had appropriated some of his master's property and then ran away. Fearing punishment for having stolen something of real value from his master, Onesimus fled to the great city of Rome, within the confines of which he hoped to get lost in the crowd and be beyond the reach of anyone who knew him. Due to Divine Providence, this fugitive slave, who was haunted with the constant fear and dread of detection and arrest, came at length into the presence of Paul, who led him into a saving knowledge of Christ and then sent him back to his Christian master, Philemon, to confess his sin and to be not merely a slave, but "a brother beloved." One is persuaded to believe that Onesimus would not have done what he did had Philemon given him the gospel of Christ like Paul did.

Onesimus' gratitude to Paul and his loving service for him caused him to be very dear to the Apostle. Paul, remembering full well that the slave's master could legally inflict on him the most extreme punishment, that of death by crucifixion, should he be so inclined, wrote this letter to Philemon and sent it to him by the hand of Onesimus.

II. The Request.

Paul approached the matter which occasioned this letter very tactfully. He indicated that he was about to make a request, but did not say bluntly, at first, what it was. He asserted his right to enjoin or to command but declined to exercise that prerogative. Instead, he preferred to follow the Christian principle of beseeching on the ground of grace. Love always shrinks from commanding.

Being a Christian gentleman, Paul absolutely refused to keep Onesimus, whose ministrations to him were exceedingly valuable, without the knowledge and consent of Philemon. With pleasure he would have retained him as a personal attendant, but under no circumstances would he do so without first obtaining the permission of Philemon. Thoroughly convinced of the salvation, sincerity, integrity and dependability of Onesimus, Paul persuaded him to go back to Philemon and to the lot from which he had fled.

These verses contain the earnest request of Paul that Onesimus be received back into full standing in Philemon's household and, also, as a brother in Christ. His plea was tender and heroic, as well as majestic and appealing. His request indicated the fact that it was not only eminently desirable that Philemon should receive back Onesimus, but, as a Christian, he was under obligation to do so. Had he declined to do so, he would have been chargeable with a flagrant neglect of his duty.

III. The Reimbursement.

Paul's letter reveals a tenderness toward the offender and at the same time a full consciousness of his guilt and the real need of restitution. Through the transforming power of Christ, Onesimus had been changed from an unprofitable slave into a most profitable servant. Even though he had been very unprofitable to Philemon, he had been genuinely saved and, therefore, was able to prove himself profitable to his master as a Christian servant and a brother in Christ. As far as possible he was willing to make restitution. He is a splendid illustration of the fact that when people become genuine Christians they are trustworthy and useful.

Filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit, Paul expressed his willingness to assume all responsibility for any indebtedness which Onesimus may have incurred. He cheerfully took upon himself the task of reimbursing Philemon for any loss which he had suffered on account of the fraud which had been perpetrated by his slave. He promised to reimburse Philemon in full for whatever indebtedness Onesimus could not repay. "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account."

When Paul promised to discharge all of the indebtedness of Onesimus, he said, in substance, credit me with what you think of him, or reckon to me his demerit, and look upon him as you look upon me, or reckon to him my merit. The placing of the debt of Onesimus to the account of Paul and the merit of Paul to the account of Onesimus is a beautiful picture of the New Testament doctrine of imputation. It is a perfect illustration of the substitutionary work of Christ. "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

It is interesting to note that when Paul appealed to Philemon to be considerate of Onesimus and to forgive him heartily, he very tactfully reminded him of his own indebtedness to Paul. He made no reference to a financial debt, but rather an obligation beyond the possibility of meeting and discharging, as it had been through the personal ministry of Paul that the slave owner had come to know the Saviour.