



Philemon



THRU**the**BIBLE

NOTES & OUTLINES WITH

J. Vernon McGee

EPISTLES



Philemon

WRITER: Paul

DATE: Probably A.D. 62 (See outline of Ephesians and the Prison Epistles introduction.)

FORM: The Epistles present a different style in revelation. God used law, history, poetry, prophecy, and the Gospels heretofore, but in the Epistles He adopted a more personal and direct method. In this intimate way, He looks back to the Cross and talks about the church. Someone has said that the Epistles are the love letters of Christ to us. Dr. Deissmann divided them into two classifications: Epistles and letters. The Epistles are general, while the letters are more personal and individual. Under this division, the Epistle of Philemon would be classified as a letter, for it is individual and intimate. There is reason to believe that Paul did not expect its contents to be divulged (at other times he knew that he was writing Scripture). This does not detract from the inspiration and value of Philemon, but rather enhances its value and message.

BACKGROUND: The story behind the Epistle to Philemon was enacted on the black background of slavery. There were approximately 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, where the total population

did not exceed 120 million. A slave was a chattel. He was treated worse than an enemy and was subject to the whim of his master. The story can be briefly reconstructed. Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon, a Christian of Colosse. This slave had opportunity to run away and seized on it. He made his way to Rome where he expected his identity and past life to be swallowed up by the great metropolis. One day he chanced upon a gathering where Paul was preaching. There he heard the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit regenerated him, making him a new creature in Christ. He told his story to Paul, and Paul sent him back to Philemon with this accompanying letter.

PURPOSE: The **primary** purpose of this epistle is to reveal Christ's love for us in what He did for us before God in pleading our case. This is the finest illustration of substitution: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee [anything], put that on mine account" (Philemon 18). We can hear Christ agreeing to take our place and to have all our sin imputed to Him—"For he hath made him ... to be sin for us ..." (2 Corinthians 5:21). He took our place in death, but He gives us His place in life: "If thou count me, therefore, a partner, receive him as myself" (Philemon 17). We have the standing of Christ before God, or we have none at all. He took our hell, and He gives us His heaven "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Onesimus, an unprofitable run-away slave, was to be received as Paul, the great apostle, would have been received in the home of Philemon.

The **practical** purpose is to teach brotherly love. Paul spoke of the new relationship between master and servant in the other Prison Epistles. Here he demonstrates how it should work. These men, belonging to two different classes in the Roman Empire, hating each other and hurting each other, are now brothers in Christ—and they are to act like it. This is the only solution to the problem of capital and labor.

OUTLINE:

- I. Genial greeting to Philemon and his family, vv. 1-3**
- II. Good reputation of Philemon, vv. 4-7**
- III. Gracious plea for Onesimus, vv. 8-16**
- IV. Guiltless substitutes for guilty, v. 17**
- V. Glorious illustration of imputation, v. 18**
- VI. General and personal items and requests, vv. 19-25**

COMMENT:

I. Genial greeting to Philemon and his family, vv. 1-3

V. 1—"A prisoner of Jesus Christ"—later, Paul makes his plea on the basis that he is a prisoner (v. 9). He was not in prison because of the cleverness of the Jerusalem religious leaders or the power of Roman officials. He was in prison because Jesus Christ willed it. Note that Timothy is with Paul. "Philemon" (see BACKGROUND). "Fellow-worker"—Philemon is not only dearly beloved, but is associated with Paul and Timothy in proclaiming the gospel.

V. 2—"Apphia" is the wife of Philemon. "Archippus" is the son of Philemon. He is a young man who is a fellow soldier, enduring hardship for the gospel. "Church in thy house"—there were no church buildings in the apostolic period. The church assembled in homes.

V. 3—This is the usual greeting of Paul (see other Prison Epistles).

II. Good reputation of Philemon, vv. 4-7

V. 4—Paul had made Philemon a subject of prayer. This would seem to denote a special and close relationship between them.

V. 5—Philemon had a good reputation as a believer. His "love" was toward the Lord Jesus and toward the other believers. His "faith" was toward the Lord Jesus, and he was faithful to other believers.

V. 6—The life of Philemon was a testimony. "Every good thing" was the result of the fact that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

V. 7—Paul had joy and consolation in the love of Philemon for other believers. "Bowels," or heart, implies the entire psychological nature. It means that by him the inner life of the believers had great satisfaction.

III. Gracious plea for Onesimus, vv. 8-16

V. 8—Paul now comes to the purpose of the letter and approaches his subject diplomatically and cautiously.

V. 9—Paul gives three reasons as the basis for his plea:

1 - “For love’s sake”—probably Philemon’s love for Paul.

2 - “Paul, the aged”—though Paul is not too old in years, his suffering and persecution as a missionary for Christ have aged him.

3 - He is a prisoner of Jesus Christ, in bonds in Rome, and could not come in person (see v. 1).

V. 10—“Onesimus” means profitable.

V. 11—“Unprofitable”—Paul is making a play upon words. “Profitable” (v. 10) was unprofitable; but now that he is a believer, he is profitable. He is now truly Onesimus—profitable to both Philemon and Paul. This is a subtle suggestion that while in prison Paul could use him.

V. 12—But Paul is returning him to Philemon.

V. 13—Paul very candidly speaks his mind. This is very personal. Perhaps Paul did not intend us to read it.

V. 14—Again he makes a subtle suggestion: Philemon could return Onesimus to him to minister to him in prison. Did Philemon send him back to Paul? I don’t know, but I think he did.

W. 15, 16—Since Onesimus has become a believer, his status and relationship to Philemon are different. He is still a slave according to the Roman law, but he is more than that—he is a beloved brother. He is now really profitable. He can live up to his name for the first time.

IV. Guiltless substitutes for guilty, v. 17

This is one of the grandest illustrations of plenary substitution and imputation. Behind Paul’s plea is Christ’s plea to the Father on behalf of the sinner who trusts Christ as the Savior. That sinner is received on the same standing that Christ is received. In other words, the saved sinner has as much right in heaven as Christ has, for he has *His* right—“accepted in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6).

V. Glorious illustration of imputation, v. 18

The reason the saved sinner is accepted in heaven is that Christ took his place down here. The sins of the sinner were put on Christ, and He paid the penalty.

VI. General and personal items and requests, vv. 19-25

V. 19–Paul agrees to pay the entire debt of Onesimus. Philemon is to receive him as he would receive Paul. “I will repay it” (see Hebrews 10:5-10).

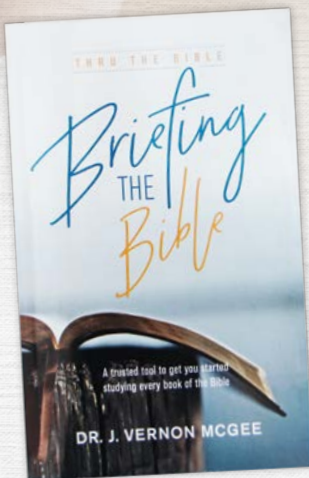
V. 20–Paul pleads for Onesimus.

V. 21–Paul feels that Philemon will do more than he requests.

V. 22–Paul expects to be released from prison. He requests prayer in that direction.

W. 23-25–These are personal greetings to mutual friends.

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