

Place: Lurgan Baptist 8:11:2016

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Philemon 1:1-25

58. THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

The ringing of the bell in the preacher's house in the middle of the night nearly wakened everyone in that home. Such calls were not unknown in the preacher's home, and they nearly always signaled trouble. The boyish voice of the speaker reminded the preacher of a week at Glorieta Baptist Assembly. *The preacher had met a boy from the distant city who had come along.* He wasn't a member of the church, indeed he was not a Christian. The preacher and the boy came to know each other through the Bible study class they shared. Many long conversations during the afternoon of that week helped the speaker know this lonely boy, at odds with this world, estranged from his family and groping to find his way in life. Those conversations also brought that boy to a realization of his need of Christ.

It was a wonderful moment when that boy said “**yes,**” to the Lord and was gloriously saved. Now he was calling, having just arrived in town with no place to stay. The boy had run away from home, at least his parents did not know where he was. He poured out the frustration of his soul, telling about the impossibility of getting through to his parents who had never accepted his new found faith.

Problems were many and serious, but step by step the situation was faced. A call was made to the parents to calm their fears, and at last that boy was persuaded to board a bus for home. Mixed emotions swept through the preachers heart as he watched the boy who didn't want to go home, board that bus. ***I wonder, what did Paul feel that day when he watched Onesimus start back to Colossae and possibly back to slavery ? What ran through the mind of Onesimus, the runaway slave as he started back to his master ?*** You see, Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon who had not only run away from his master but probably had stolen from him also. (1:18) He ended up a 1,000 mile away in the throngs of the city of Rome where Paul was a prisoner. In some way, possibly because of conviction of sin, or fear of being found out, or possibly through meeting Epaphras, then on visit to Rome from Colosse to see Paul, Onesimus came under the ministry of the imprisoned apostle.

My that ministry bore great fruit. Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ and became so fond of this new convert that he spoke of feeling for him as father would for his child (1:10) So Paul writes to Philemon requesting him to forgive Onesimus, to receive Onesimus, to recognize Onesimus not now as a slave but as “*a brother beloved.*” (1:16) My isn't God's grace amazing ? I mean, here was Onesimus, running away from Philemon, a distance of over a 1000 miles to Rome, only to fall into the hands of Paul of all people, who led him to Christ. My is this God of providence your God ? Is this God of power your God ? Is this God of patience your God ? ***Have you become discouraged because of the indifference of your***

unsaved family ? Have you become disheartened because of their disinterest in the things of God ? Will you remember Onesimus who ran away from his master, only to run into His Saviour. Now although this letter is small in its quantity it's not small in its quality. Here is a purely private letter, the only one that has been included in the Canon of Scripture. It expounds no doctrine, exposes no error but it exalts the Lord and encourages Christian courtesy in all circles of society. It is the shortest yet one of the sweetest of Paul's letters. Now in order for us to see this letter in its historical context we need to notice,

1. The Locality of the Church:

Do you see (1:2) ? It speaks of “ *the church in thy house.*” Where was that ? Well, if we compare this letter with Colossians we discover that Philemon lived at Colosse. (Col 4:9 16-17) Now Colosse as we have noted before was one of a trio of cities Hierapolis and Laodicea being the other two and it was located about 125 miles south east of the city of Ephesus. No doubt this church was the outgrowth of Paul's three year ministry at Ephesus. (Acts 19, 20:17-18) 1.

2. The Slavery of the Empire:

For Onesimus was a slave. (1:16) Scholars tell us that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, men and women who were treated like pieces of merchandise to buy and sell. You see, a slave was not considered a person but a living tool. Any master had the right of life

and death over his slaves. Pliny tells how Vedius Pollio treated a slave. The slave was carrying a tray of crystal goblets into the courtyard when he dropped and broke one. Immediately Pollio ordered the slave to be thrown into the fishpond in the middle of the court where the man eating fish tore him to pieces. *You see, slavery was an accepted institution in the Roman empire and some folk are shocked that Paul made no attempt to abolish slavery.* Actually Paul had a tender interest in slaves (1 Cor 7:20-24 Col 3:22-4:1 Eph 6:5-9) but he recognized that salvation is better than legislation. *Getting laws right is good getting hearts is better.* Anyhow about two thirds of the Roman Empire were slaves, to have argued for its abolition would have been to argue for chaos in society. Instead Paul just broke slavery from the inside by changing relationships and attitudes involved.

So he urges Philemon to see Onesimus as a brother not as a piece of property. He referred to Onesimus as “ *my son,*” (1:10) who is “ *dear to me.*” (1:16) My do you not why we do not have slavery in Western civilization today ? It's because hearts and minds were changed by the Christian gospel and by Christian principles of human love, grace, and equality. So keep in mind, 1:2:

3. The Adversity of the Apostle:

Do you see how Paul begins this letter ? (1:1) Now Paul wrote this little note about 62 A.D. during his first Roman imprisonment. This letter belongs to what we call the Prison Epistles, the others being Ephesians, Colossians

and Philippians. If we had been there we might have had a conversation with Paul like this, “ *Poor Paul, it’s too bad these Romans put you in jail.*” “ ***They didn’t put me in jail.***” “ *Oh, we know what you mean. Those hateful religious rulers brought a charge against you.*” “ ***They didn’t put me in jail either.***” “ *Who put you in jail, then ?*” “ ***Jesus Christ. I’m His prisoner.***” “ *You mean to tell me that you would serve Someone who would put you in prison ?*” “ ***Yes, when it’s His will for me to be in prison, I’m in prison. When it’s His will for me to be out of prison, I’ll be out of prison. When it’s His will for me to be sick, I’m going to be sick. I belong to Him. Since I belong to Him, I have learned to be content in whatsoever state I am. Everything is all right. Don’t worry about me for ‘ we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.’***”

(Rom 8:28) What a man. Here was Paul in prison and he might have said, “ *This is the end of my ministry,*” but he shuts his eyes to all secondary causes and sees in his imprisonment, as Joseph, long before, had seen in his, an all wise providence. Paul says, “ *I am a prisoner,*” not of Nero, nor of Rome but of “ *Jesus Christ for it is Christ who sent me to Rome.*” (Acts 23:11) You see,

1. Paul Recognised the Providence of God:

It would have been easy for him to sulk and to quit upon his God, but Paul saw the Divine aspect of his trial. Do you feel that you cannot get free from your situation ? Are you depressed, frustrated, disillusioned ? Do you need to look higher this ? Higher than the problem, higher

than the pressure, higher than the persecution ? Do you need to rise above your circumstances and fix your eyes on the God of providence ? (Gen 50:20) Do you see the providence of God in that situation in which you find yourself ? 1.

2. Paul Recognised the Purpose of God:

Sure, there was the reduction of his movement, but there was the reach of his ministry. My while Paul was in prison, he “ *redeemed the time.*” (Eph 5:16) There was, *The Power of His Pen:* for four New Testament letters flowed from his pen at this time.

The Power of His Prayers: Paul believed that prayer is effectual with God so he prayed much while he had the opportunity to do so.(Eph 3:14 Phil 1:9-11 Col 1:9) I *The Power of His Preaching:*

Indeed this is not how Onesimus came to hear the gospel and believe on Christ ? “ *Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ,*” Is this how you see yourself ? Not physically, but spiritually. Are you a captive to the Lord’s Will, the Lord’s Word, the Lord’s Work ? 1:2:3:

(4) The Intimacy of the Letter:

For this book, the shortest of all Paul’s epistles is one of four personal letters to individuals penned by Paul. The others are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. I say this is an intimate letter because it deals with a delicate subject, forgiveness. The word “ *forgive,*” means “ *to dismiss absolutely from one’s thought.*” (Ex 34:6-7) Can you imagine Onesimus heading back to Colosse with this

covering letter in his hand ? Can you see him as he approaches Philemon's house ? What was going through his mind ? *Could Philemon forgive Onesimus ? Should Philemon forgive Onesimus ? Would Philemon forgive Onesimus ?* Well, look at what scholars call “ *a literary gem,*” and notice,

1. The PREREQUISITE to FORGIVENESS 1:1-7

What is required before forgiveness can be expressed ? Why you must be forgiven. And there is abundant evidence here that Philemon was a true servant of the Lord. Can you see a beautiful picture of a Christian household here ? Philemon whose name means “ *affectionate,*” his wife Apphia and their son Archippus, who may have had pastoral oversight in the church, taking the place of Epaphras (Col 4:17) who had gone to Rome to help Paul. (1:23) You see,

(a) Philemon's Heart was Touched by God's Grace:

Do you see how Paul describes him ? “ *Our dearly beloved and fellow labourer.*” It would be fascinating to know when, where, and how Philemon had first met Paul. Perhaps news of what was happening at Ephesus had reached Colosse. For to Ephesus had come a small wiry little Jew, a tentmaker by trade and an evangelist by calling. Paul had stayed in Ephesus for three whole years during which time all of Asia “ *heard the Word.*” (Acts 19:10) His preaching had turned Ephesus upside down and inside out. There was a great moving of the Holy Spirit. Multitudes had been converted to Jesus

Christ. (Acts 19:18-20) All kinds of miracles had been performed. A public bonfire of priceless books on the occult had been burned. *News of these startling happenings must have spread in all directions.* No doubt Philemon had come to Ephesus to see for himself what was taking place, just as people at the turn of the 20th century, came from all over Britain to see what was happening in Wales at the time of the Welsh revival. However, it came about, Philemon and Paul had met. It was truly a momentous meeting for (1:19) suggests that it was Paul who led Philemon to faith in Christ. And Paul used this special relationship to encourage his friend to receive Onesimus. Christians, above all people should be magnanimous, generous and sincere in forgiveness. Has your heart been touched by the grace of God ? Then you should be willing to forgive. (a)

(b) Philemon's Hands were Touched by God's Grace:

For Paul refers to him as “ *our dearly beloved and fellow-labourer,*” or “ *fellow-worker.*” (1:1) It reminds Philemon of the time during Paul's three year stint at Ephesus (Acts 20:31) when he helped the apostle in the work of the gospel. My Philemon shared his faith. Do you ? Do you know what it is to gossip the gospel ?

(c) Philemon's Home was Touched by God's Grace:

For Paul speaks here of “ *the church in thy house.*” (1:2) First century churches met in homes (Rom 16:5 1 Cor 16:19) church buildings being unknown until the third century. My here is a little company of believers

meeting for worship in Philemon's home. I wonder does the atmosphere of your home make it like a church ? One little boy was asked why he believed in God ? " *Well,*" he replied, " *I guess it just runs in the family.*" That " *was the church in your house.*" As the pastor visited in her home one mother was very much concerned about making the proper impression. She called to her daughter

" *Honey, bring the book that mother loves so much and reads so often.*" The little girl entered the room with the Sears catalogue. But what a home this was. You see, Philemon,

Entertained the Saints:

For the church met in his house. Moreover, do you see how Paul closes the letter ? He says, " *Prepare me also a lodging.*" " *Philemon get the guest room ready.*" Have you ever thought about the hospitality commands of the New Testament ? It ought to mark the pastor/elder " *given to hospitality.*" (1 Tim 3:2) It ought to mark the believer, " *use hospitality one to another without grudging.*" (1 Pet 4:9) " *A cold, unfriendly church contradicts the gospel message. Yet unfriendliness stands out as one of the most common criticisms people have of local churches.*" (A. Strauch) It begs the question, is your home open ?

Encouraged the Saints:

Paul says, " *the bowels (hearts) of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.*" (1:7) The word " *refreshed,*" is from (*anapauo*) a military term that speaks

of an army resting from a march. Philemon was a second Barnabas, a true son of consolation, a son of encouragement. Everywhere he went he had a word of encouragement for every believer and a helping hand for all who loved the Lord. Have you discovered that some people when they come around you and talk with you, they depress you. And when they're gone you say, " *Well, thank goodness for that.*" They are fault finding, critical, hard and gloomy. Then there are others and you're not in their company five minutes till a shot of sunshine has permeated your whole being. My this was Philemon, forever the one to encourage, to fresh, to strengthen. Is this you ?

Enriched the Saints:

The word translated " *communication,*" in (1:6) is better rendered " *fellowship.*" Handley Moule suggests that the word, as used here, refers to Philemon's generous financial fellowship motivated by his love for the Saviour. I wonder had Paul benefited from Philemon's generosity ? I wonder was Epaphras in Rome because Philemon had sent him ? (Col 4:12) Whatever, he saw his money as belonging to God. (1 Chron 29:14) *Is that how you look upon your money ?* You see, you will never put God ahead of money until you understand that your money is really His money. *If you want to know whether God is really first in your life, look at your cheque book. The rest is just talk.* Has God blessed you financially ? (Deut 8:18) Well, are you using His money to further His

cause ? What a man Philemon was, but he was about to face a serious test of his faith and love as he learned about the conversion of Onesimus. For notice here,

(2) THE PLEA FOR FORGIVENESS 1:8-16

Did you notice that Paul will not command but he will appeal ? He will not hesitate to use every argument he can, even the argument of his age and bonds. You see, Paul is pleading on behalf of his son now and as he intercedes for Onesimus he presents three strong appeals. In effect he says, “ *Philemon recognize,*”

(a) THE POWER OF GOD:

Onesimus is a Saved Man. Do you see how Paul describes him in (1:10) Think of this. *A free man came to Paul bound, a bound man left Paul free.* Onesimus was truly saved. The very fact that he had gone back to Colosse to “ *face the music,*” indicates that he was really saved. For debt dodging and duty dodging do not belong to the Christian faith, there is the need for apology and restitution. My salvation is free, but the moral obligations that accompany it can often prove to be very expensive indeed. Here was Onesimus but he wasn't the Onesimus Philemon had previously known. He was a new man for the Bible says, “ *If any man be in Christ he is a new creature old things are passed away behold all things are become new.*” (2 Cor 5:21)

Are you a new person ? Have you shown the fruit of genuine repentance ? Onesimus's material status was that

of a mere slave, the lowest of the low. Yet his spiritual status was that of a child of God, the highest of the high. Philemon and Onesimus were now brothers in the Lord. They now had the same Father, God the Father, they had both been redeemed by the same Saviour's precious blood, they were both indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. *Would it not be unthinkable for Philemon to turn away such a person ?* Yet is that not what you are doing ? My *the day we got saved we forfeited our rights in this matter of forgiveness.* It really isn't an option and in life we will be challenged when it comes to people who have done us wrong. It does not matter if we are right or wrong, but what matters is that we fully and freely extend Christian forgiveness. You see, if Philemon did not forgive Onesimus he would become the slave, he would be bound. (Matt 18:34) Are you bound ? Do you need to be set free from internal torment that flows from an unforgiving spirit ? (a)

(b) THE PURPOSE OF GOD:

Onesimus is a Serving Man. Paul engages in a play on words here. You see, Onesimus was a common slave name meaning “ *useful.*” Paul says in effect, “ *Mr. Useful may have been Mr. Useless to you once, but now he's Mr. Useful once more.*” Paul loved Onesimus and would have kept in Rome as a fellow worker but he did not want to tell Philemon what to do. Voluntary service and sacrifice motivated by love is what the Lord wants from His children. *Onesimus is now useful to the Lord.* My is this not the purpose of God in conversion ? That we live a purposeful, useful, and fruitful life. While we are most

definitely saved by faith and not by works, true faith definitely works. Paul says, “ *For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works.*” (Eph 2:10) Do you know what we are saved from ? Useless living. Do you know what we are saved by ? The grace of God. Do you know what we are saved for ? To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Do you know how that is done ? By purposeful, useful, fruitful lives.

(c) **THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD:**

Onesimus is a Separated Man. Do you see how Paul puts it in (1:15) ? “ *For perhaps*,” because no man can see the secret providence of God at work, but surely God had this in mind when Onesimus fled ? While we are unable to reconcile the sovereignty of God with the responsibility of man, we are forced to confess that God Himself can. The story of Onesimus and Philemon is a real life illustration of (Rom 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.*” I wonder did Philemon really believe that God was working for His good when Onesimus had just robbed him and deserted him ? Hardly, but unknown to Philemon, and unknown to you, God is in complete control. ***He rules and overrules.*** God permitted Onesimus to go to Rome that he might meet Paul and become a believer.

Monica the mother of St. Augustine pleads with God that her son might not go to Rome with all its temptations and debauchery. Yet God in His providence allows him to go, and there in that very place which has been dreaded

Augustine is brought to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. My how do we react when God allows a difficult trial to cross our pathway ? How do we cope when a harsh providence comes our way ? Can we take everything that happens to us as coming from the hand of God even when “ *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform ?*” Do we look at the mystery of providence from an eternal standpoint ? My God can bring blessing out of harsh circumstances, God can bring good out of evil, God bring joy out of despair. Philemon could look back years later and say, “ *I’ll the bless the hand that guided, I’ll bless the heart that planned.*” 1:2:

(3) **THE PRICE OF FORGIVENESS**

I mean what about the money that Onesimus took ? What about the Roman law that demanded branding or death ? Can Onesimus go around smiling, as if to say, “ *I sure am glad that everything has worked out so wonderfully ?*” **No.** We still have an offender in Onesimus and the offended in Philemon. Therefore, something must be done. The debt must be paid. Somehow, the account is going to have be settled. Its here that Paul’s statement becomes so precious. “ *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account.*” (v 18) Is this not a marvelous picture of the work of Christ ? Is this not a wonderful illustration of how our account is settled with an offended God ? You know when we think of an account, we usually think of,

(a) **STARTING THE ACCOUNT:**

I mean most of us are familiar with an account of some kind. But whether it is a credit card account, or a bank account, the account has to be started. *Do you know something ?* Man does not go through life without an account with God. That account was opened in the Garden of Eden. You see, just as everything was going well until Onesimus wronged Philemon, thus starting his account, so everything was fine until Adam wronged God with his sin. Then, the account was opened for all of us, the offspring of Adam. Paul says, “ *Wherefore as by one man*,” (Rom 5:12) My our sins, offences, wrongs, they must all be paid for. That brings us to think of,

(b) SETTLING THE ACCOUNT:

Paul says, “ *Look if Onesimus stole something from you. Just put it on my account. Put it on my credit card.*” (1:18) Dr. Scofield puts it like this “ *receive him as myself,*” reckon to him my merit. “ *If he hath wronged thee or oweth thee ought put that on me account,*” reckon to me his demerit. My is this not the glory of the gospel ? It’s as though we hear Christ say to the Father, “ *Father put that on mine account.*” But don’t stop there for there’s more, for His clean account, His righteousness, has been imputed to us. **Our account becomes His. His account becomes ours.** Both of these truths are incorporated in one of the wonderful verses in the Bible, “ *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.*” (2 Cor 5:21)

Bible scholars call this the doctrine of imputation. Our sins were imputed to Christ, charged to His account. Likewise, because of Calvary, Christ’s righteousness is credited to our account putting us “ *in the black,*” with God. Now don’t forget that Paul is writing this note to plead with Philemon to forgive, to receive, to restore Onesimus. It’s as though Paul is saying to Philemon “ *Freely ye have received, freely give.*” (Matt 10:8) Indeed when writing to the Colossian church which met in Philemon’s home, Paul says, “ *Forgiving one another even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*” (Col 3:13) My here is where the rubber hits the road. In spite of all we did to God, He forgave us, therefore we ought to forgive others. Have you been deeply hurt by a fellow believer ? Do you find forgiveness difficult ? Do you need to stand under the shadow of the cross and think about God’s free forgiveness of your sins there ? Having received His eternal forgiveness, how can you not extend temporal forgiveness ? Charles Spurgeon said “ Go to Calvary to learn how you may be forgiven and then linger there to learn how to forgive.” (1) (2) (3)

(4) THE PARTNERS IN FORGIVENESS

The Christian life is not lived in a vacuum. Believers do not act alone, independent of the fellowship. By sending greetings from five men known to him, Paul reminds Philemon of his accountability to them all. Failure to forgive Onesimus would disappoint their high expectations of him, and bring him under their discipline. Look at them briefly. When we think of,

(a) Epaphras: we think of Fellowship:

Paul says, “ *Epaphras my fellow-prisoner.*” (v 23) Was he the pastor/teacher of the church that met in Philemon’s home ? (Col 1:7 4:12) But now he was identified closely with Paul in the apostle’s imprisonment. You see, fellowship is identifying the needs of others and seeking to minister to those needs.

(b) Marcus: we think of Failure:

John Mark who got “ *cold feet,*” on Paul’s first missionary journey and went home to Mummy. (Acts 13:13) But isn’t it wonderful to know that failure is not final for such is the restoring grace that Mark the failure made good and came to spiritual maturity. (2 Tim 4:11) My do you feel that you are a failure ? Have you let the Lord let down ? Have you let others down ? Like Mark, do you need to pray “ *Lord restore to me the joy of Thy salvation ?*”

(c) Aristarchus: we think of Faithfulness:

A native of Thessalonica (Acts 20:4 27:2) he had a long association with Paul and had been through some rough times with him. (Acts 19:29 27:4) Here was Paul’s fellow-worker, Paul’s fellow-prisoner (Col 4:10) Indeed according to tradition Aristarchus was martyred in Rome during the persecutions under Nero. My ... here was a man who was faithful to Paul through thick and thin. Do you need a model for what it is to be a friend ? Then Aristarchus is your man.

(d) Demas: we think of Folly:

He is described here as one of Paul’s fellow workers but later we read “ *Demas hath forsaken me having loved this present world.*” (2 Tim 4:10) He began well, but he did not last. Do you know someone who began well but the temptations of this world proved to be too strong ? Do you know someone who once attended most faithfully but for various reasons fell away ? What a warning Demas is. “ *Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.*” (1 Cor 10:12) Finally,

(e) Luke: we think of Fellow-Feeling:

Sympathy. Luke “ *the beloved physican,*” (Col 4:14) was a Gentile Christian doctor and the author of the third gospel and the Acts. He was a frequent traveling companion of Paul and no doubt took care of the apostles physical needs. (2 Cor 12:7) Just before his martyrdom Paul said, “ *Only Luke is with me.*” (2 Tim 4:11) What a man, bearing Paul’s burdens, with him to the very end. My do we know what it is to bear “ *one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ ?*” (Gal 6:2) Now these five men were known to Philemon. He had the opportunity to set a good example for them by forgiving Onesimus. On the other hand failing to forgive, would fracture the bond of fellowship Philemon enjoyed with them. ***Now the book of Philemon ends here, but not the story. How did it end ? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus ?*** Its probable that he not only forgave him but that he freed him. (1:21) It’s unlikely that this book would have found its way into the New Testament canon if he had not.

Carla Barton the founder of the American Red Cross was once painfully betrayed by a fellow worker Years later a friend reminded her of the incident. “ *I don’t remember that,*” replied Miss Barton. “ *You don’t remember,*” asked the astonished friend “ *But you were so hurt at the time. Surely you must remember.*” “ *No,*” Clara insisted gently “ *I distinctly remember forgetting it ever happened.*”

Do you need to extend forgiveness to someone ? Have you been nursing a grudge ? Are you giving someone the silent treatment ? Are you ready to forgive the debt ?

My how can you sit at the Lord’s Table with an unforgiving spirit ? How can you sit there and think about God forgiving you, when you won’t forgive others ? Your unwillingness to forgive is unthinkable. It is a rebellious, blatant, open act of disobedience to God, for we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us. (Eph 4:32

Col 3:13) Philemon forgave his Onesimus. **Is it not time that your forgave yours ?**