

THE EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO PHILEMON

TEXT: PHILEMON 1-25

INTRODUCTION:

1. One of the cities mentioned several times in the New Testament is the ancient city of Colosse. Today this city no longer exists.
2. Today it is just a pile of ruins in modern day Turkey. But it was a great city in Paul's day.
3. In Colosse there dwelt a wealthy Christian gentleman by the name of Philemon. Sometime around AD 64, the apostle Paul wrote a personal letter to this man and ever since then he has become famous because this letter is part of the Bible.
4. Philemon, like many others in that day, had a number of slaves working in his household. This surprises many modern readers but we should understand the context and we should know a little bit of history. H.A. Ironside wrote: "Christianity did not immediately overturn the evil custom of slavery, although eventually it was the means of practically driving it out of the whole civilized world."
5. Philemon was apparently saved through the ministry of Paul. Paul thought highly of him and prayed for him regularly (Phil. 4-7).
6. Some years had gone by, and a slave by the name of Onesimus had run away from Philemon's house. Apparently he had robbed Philemon before running away and fleeing to Rome (vs. 18).
7. How he arrived in Rome we do not know, but somehow, in the providence of God he met the apostle Paul, the man who led his master to the Lord.
8. Paul was imprisoned in Rome at this time and it was from a Roman prison that he wrote his four "Prison Epistles" – Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians.
9. We do not know why Onesimus was in prison. Possibly he was arrested for some crime, and was perhaps thrown into jail next to Paul. Or maybe he just took it upon himself to visit Paul in prison.
10. At any rate, it was the hand of God that brought Onesimus face to face with the great apostle Paul. And this is the background to this wonderful little epistle.

I. GOD BRINGS SINNERS TO THE PLACE OF REPENTANCE

1. The unseen hand of God is always at work bringing sinners to the place of repentance. Paul alludes to this in verse 15 when he says,

- "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever."
2. The word "perhaps" comes from the old English word "hap," which means "an occurrence, happening, or accident."
 3. As Christians we know there is no such thing as good luck, and that all occurrences and happenings, and even what we call accidents are decreed by God.
 4. We need to understand that God allows all things to happen. Nothing happens that God does not allow to happen. And God has a purpose for everything.
 5. Romans 8:28 says, "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" (cf. Gen. 45:5, 8; 50:20).
 6. So "perhaps" comes from the old English word "hap," which refers to the providential overruling of God (cf. Ruth 2:3).
 7. Go through the book of Ruth and see God's hand at work.
 8. Read the book of Jonah and see God working behind the scenes. Even the unconverted mariners recognized this and they asked Jonah to call upon his God, lest the ship sink.
 9. In Esther 6:1 we read that one night Ahasuerus, the king of Persia, could not sleep, and so he commanded that his servants bring him the book of records of the chronicles; and these records were read before the king.
 10. And it was found written, that Mordecai had told how two of the king's chamberlains were conspiring to assassinate King Ahasuerus.
 11. This led to Mordecai being honored and promoted. And the wicked schemes of Haman were thwarted. The Jews were delivered, and Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.
 12. And so it was in the providence of God that God brought Onesimus to the apostle Paul. We can only imagine their conversation. After Onesimus got saved his conscience started to bother him and he began to think about what he did to Philemon.
 13. So he says to Paul: "I am a runaway slave." By the way, this is evidence of a genuine conversion – the desire to get things right, to make restitution, etc.
 14. So Onesimus opens up to Paul and tells him that he has run away.
- Paul: "Oh, is that right? Where are you from?"
- Onesimus: "Colosse."
- Paul: "You don't say? I have a good friend there that I led to the Lord. His name is Philemon."

Onesimus: "Do you mean the same Philemon whose wife is Apphia (vs. 2)? And they live over by Elmont Road?"

Paul: "Yes sir, that's the one."

Onesimus: "Do you think I should go back and get things right?"

Paul: "Yes, I do. I'll tell you what. I will write a letter to my friend Philemon, and hopefully he will go easy with you."

15. Beloved, this is what is known as the providence of God. He brought a runaway slave together with the same man who led his master Philemon to the Lord.

16. God not only brings sinners to the place of repentance; He also guides and directs believers. And now that Onesimus had received the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour, God was directing his steps.

17. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD" (Ps. 37:23).

18. Onesimus was a good man now that he was saved, which brings me to my next point.

II. GOD CHANGES SINNERS FROM UNPROFITABLE TO PROFITABLE (vss. 10, 11).

1. If you know your Bible, then you know that Bible names are very important. For example, Abram means "high father" or "exalted father." But God changed his name to Abraham, which means "Father of Many Nations" (Gen. 17:5).
2. When Abraham's wife, Sarah, found out that she was to have a baby she laughed (Gen. 18:12-15), and so the baby was named Isaac, which means "Laughter" (Gen. 21:5, 6).
3. Now, Onesimus' name means "profitable" but apparently he was not very profitable when he worked for Philemon (Philemon 11).
4. But after running away, he met Paul and was gloriously converted. And so now Paul calls him his "son" who he has led to the Lord (Philemon 10).
5. In Colossians 4:9, Paul refers to Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved brother."
6. In other words, Onesimus has been transformed by the grace of God from an unprofitable sinner to a profitable saint (Philemon 11).
7. God does not just want reformation, He wants transformation.
8. Onesimus was not just reformed; he was transformed. Today there are people who have reformation but no transformation. They have religion but no regeneration.
9. Religion without regeneration is dangerous.

10. Onesimus was regenerated by the Spirit of God. He was transformed by the grace of God. And so now he truly was "Profitable." Now he was living up to his name.

III. GOD SENT HIS SON TO DIE FOR SINNERS

1. This little epistle contains a beautiful picture of the doctrine of imputation, the doctrine of the substitutionary death of Christ, and the doctrine of reconciliation.
2. The Scofield Bible gives a good definition of the doctrine of imputation on page 1308, "Imputation is the act of God whereby He accounts righteousness to the believer in Christ, who has borne the believer's sins in vindication of the law."
3. Or, to be more succinct: "To put it on account" (cf. Philemon 18).
4. When Adam sinned, we all sinned because his sin was imputed to our account (cf. Rom. 5:12-14, 19).
5. But notice that Paul adds that, "so by the obedience of one (Christ) shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19).
6. So when Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins there was a judicial transfer of the sin of man to the Lord Jesus Christ because He died as our substitute (Isa. 53:3-6; II Cor. 5:21a).
7. And just as there was a transfer of our sin to Him, in like manner there was a judicial transfer of His righteousness to us (II Cor. 5:21b).
8. *Yes, the old account was settled long ago; And the record's clear today, For He washed my sins away, When the old account was settled long ago."*
9. Whenever you see the doctrine of substitution, look carefully and you will also see the doctrine of imputed righteousness (cf. I Peter 2:24; 3:18).
10. And this imputed righteousness is the only righteousness that is acceptable to God. Man's righteousness is totally unacceptable (cf. Isa. 64:6).
11. Paul's relationship with his friend Onesimus is a picture of imputation. Paul said to Philemon, "If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself" (Phil.17).
12. This is a picture of imputation of merit.
13. Then Paul goes on to say, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account" (Phil.18).
14. This is a picture of imputation of demerit.

CONCLUSION:

1. Some day each and every person gathered here today will stand before the throne of God. If you have been saved by the blood of Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ will bring you to the Father and say: "Father, he (or she) is a sinner saved by grace. He has wronged Thee – that is certain – but "put that on mine account."
2. Up in heaven we will sing with the redeemed of all ages, "Jesus paid it all, *All to Him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain: He washed it white as snow.*"
3. But there will be others that have never repented of their sins. They have never trusted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. And so, alas, when the books are opened up yonder in heaven, the Lord will say: "GUILTY! CONDEMNED! DAMNED FOR ALL ETERNITY!"
4. Think about this: How foolish Onesimus would have been if he had taken Paul's letter and threw it away. If he had decided to plead his own case before Philemon without Paul's help.
5. Yes, everybody would agree that would be foolish and yet millions of lost sinners reject the intercessory work of Christ and foolishly believe they can get to heaven on the basis of their good works, or church membership, or baptism, etc.