

No.24, Philemon

As its name indicates this epistle was addressed primarily to a first-century Christian by the name of *Philemon*. Philemon was a citizen of Colosse and was part of the church there, proved by reference being made in v. 2, to *Archippus* who was a minister of Jesus Christ in the Colossian church – Col. 4: 17. To Philemon, the Apostle Paul sent this letter. That in itself is not unique, in that Paul addressed some of his other letters to individuals such as Timothy and Titus. However, the particular feature that does make this letter unique is that it addresses a private matter which Paul was led to take up with his close and beloved friend Philemon – namely, the reception of a poor, fugitive, servant, back into the favour and household of his master.

Furthermore, in recounting Paul's effort to have a runaway slave restored to his master, this epistle conveys a special message, a particular facet of God's plan of salvation; that by His grace the vilest of sinners may be reached, saved, and recovered from the pit into which they have fallen. Consequently, God has placed this letter in His Word as a reminder to His people that He is able to save to the uttermost, the very worst of men. This epistle is an impelling persuasion that we are not to count any as beyond hope, but rather we are to labour for their conversion as the Lord gives help and power.

The character in this letter who was the object of the marvelous grace of God is *Onesimus*. He had been a servant in the household of Philemon; had apparently wronged his master, fled from Colosse to Rome, where he came in contact with the Apostle Paul, under whose ministry he was converted. Consequently, such was the work of grace wrought in Onesimus's life, Paul felt constrained to pen this letter to Philemon in order to make him aware of what had occurred. It is my purpose to bring to your attention from Paul's letter to Philemon, some facets of the Gospel in the salvation of Onesimus.

I. FIRST, LET US NOTICE THE DEMONSTRATION OF DIVINE GRACE IN HIS LIFE

Onesimus had been truly saved in Rome through the ministry of Paul. In v.10, Paul speaks of having "begotten" Onesimus, by which he simply means that he was the instrument of God in leading Onesimus to Christ. Then in v.16, Paul describes Onesimus as "a brother beloved," language which also speaks of the fact of his genuine experience of salvation. Running through the entire narrative therefore, is the thread of Divine grace. There is no explanation of the salvation of this run-away slave other than the grace of God. When we think carefully about the entire event as recorded for us, various aspects of Divine grace are clearly seen.

1. **We see Divine grace in the preservation of Onesimus.** He became a fugitive. He ran, for as it would appear from this letter, he had stolen from Philemon. But in fleeing, he ran from the influence and message of the Gospel. Note that in Philemon's household, there was much that was designed to present a godly influence. (a) The master and mistress were godly people, vs. 1, 2a, 5, & 7. (b) There was a church in Philemon's house, v.2b. From all of this, the prodigal slave ran. Broke his master's trust, and fled to the dark, vile, city of Rome with all of its debauchery & wickedness placing Onesimus in great danger. Yet the grace of God kept him, though he was still unregenerate. Jude v.1 – note from this verse that those who are believers were sanctified by the Father; preserved in Jesus Christ; and called -- i.e., by the Holy Spirit according to the analogy of Scripture. They were sanctified by the Father in the sense that they were set apart or chosen, but then *preserved* & called. Note the order of these words -- not "called" & "preserved." In other words, sinners were preserved from going to hell, and then they were delivered and saved. So Onesimus was preserved and led by providence to Paul and was converted.

2. **We see Divine grace in the regeneration of Onesimus.** There is reference to the regeneration of this willful sinner. See again v.10b, "*Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.*" While Paul is referring here to his instrumentality in Onesimus's salvation, he uses language that speaks of the new birth and regeneration, 1 Pet 1: 3. So, Paul saw Onesimus brought to salvation because grace wrought a great change in his soul. The new birth or regeneration is a work of grace alone. In that work the sinner has no part for he is dead in his sins, Eph 2: 4, 5.

3. **We see Divine grace in the conversion of Onesimus.** Onesimus became a different man, converted by God's grace into a saint. There is proof of his conversion and change in some of the details of Paul's epistle, in that reference is made to Onesimus ministering to the Lord and serving in His work. (a) Note the helpfulness of his ministry, v.11 – note the word *profitable*, which is the meaning of Onesimus's name. See also v.13 -- Paul saw potential in Onesimus, in that the Apostle would have liked him to minister to him in prison. Such a fact denotes that a deep change had occurred in Onesimus. Had an interest in the things of God, a desire to help on the ministry of the Gospel, Col 4: 9. (b) Note the humility of his ministry, v.12 -- Onesimus was sent by Paul to Philemon. It is most likely that he carried this very letter. Had he not been a new man, he would not have returned, for it required deep humility to return to face the one he wronged.

II. SECONDLY, NOTE IN THIS EPISTLE THAT THE MEDIATION OF CHRIST IS SHOWN

Salvation is by the mediation of Christ. Woven into this letter is a presentation of the work of Christ our Mediator. It is revealed in some of the statements that Paul makes about his involvement in the matter. His role was

to bring about reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus -- that is the purpose and goal of the work of Christ our Mediator.

(a) **Note Paul's position.** The Apostle comes between the two. He has a close relationship with each: Onesimus – v.12b; Philemon – v.17. The word “partner” denotes a close bond. Original word also means “fellowship.” On that basis Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus – note in v.17 the words, “*receive him as myself.*” Is not that Christ’s argument with the Father for the acceptance of sinners? Also, in v.12, observe how Paul stresses that Onesimus is one with him – “mine own bowels.” So, there is a clear portrayal of Christ’s dual relationship with God and men as the Mediator, Gal 3: 20; 1 Tim 2: 5.

(b) **Note Paul's payment.** See vs. 18, 19a, willing to pay Onesimus’s debt. V.18 presents the truth of substitution -- willingly undertook to pay the debt. V.19a presents the truth of surety-ship -- Paul undertaking to be responsible for Onesimus’s obligations, Heb 7: 22.

(c) **Note Paul's plea,** see vs. 9a, 10, 12b, 17. Through Christ’s intercession men are saved, Heb 7: 25, John 17.

### III. FINALLY, NOTE THAT THIS EPISTLE PRESENTS THE NEW POSITION OF THE ONE WHO IS SAVED

See vs.15 & 16 – the truth is presented here that those reconciled to God become brethren beloved in the household of faith. It is only the Gospel that can produce true equality among men because the Gospel reconciles men to God and in doing so, to each other, Gal 3: 26-28.

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