

Philemon

Today's daily readings take us to one of the shortest books of the Bible, but one which is filled with exhortation and encouragement for us, as we wait for the coming of our Master. We could do no better than to review the lessons contained therein as we prepare our minds for the partaking of the emblems which speak to us of the sacrifice of Christ.

In his salutation to Philemon, the inspired Apostle Paul makes reference to "The Ecclesia *in thy house*". Given that we already know he had servants, the implication would be that Philemon had a degree of prosperity, and had a house of sufficient size to accommodate the brethren and sisters which made up the Ecclesia. It is highly probable that this ecclesia was actually the ecclesia at Colosse, which was the recipient of another epistle, bearing that name. The evidence for this, is that in his Epistle to Philemon, Paul makes reference to a number of individuals, who are also referred to in Colossians as being members of that ecclesia, as follows:

Col. 4:9 Onesimus (Phil. 1:10)

Col. 4:10 Aristarchus (Phil. 1:24)

Col. 4:12 Epaphras (Phil. 1:23)

Col. 4:14 Demas (Phil. 1:24)

Col. 4:17 Archippus (Phil. 1:2)

This is very fitting, as part of the letter to the Colossians contains instructions regarding Masters and their Servants, and how each should behave to one another:

"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice as men pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God" (Col. 3:22).

"Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1).

The central theme of the epistle to Philemon concerns Onesimus, a runaway slave, and an appeal for him to become reunited with his Master, as we shall proceed to show. Colossians is an epistle to the whole ecclesia, whereas Philemon was an open letter to an individual who was part of that ecclesia.

The precise circumstances of Onesimus are difficult to ascertain, but from reading the epistle, we may gather the following points:

- He was a slave who was disobedient, and unprofitable
- He appears to have defrauded his master in some undisclosed way
- Having absconded, he met up with the Apostle Paul, who was in bonds for the Gospel's sake
- He became converted, and, obeying the Gospel, was baptized.
- He was no longer unprofitable, but rather Paul desired that he should remain with him to assist with his work – but recognizing Onesimus' responsibility to his Master, he instead sought to reconcile the two.

Under the Law of Moses, it was commanded:

“Thou shalt not deliver unto his Master the servant which is escaped from his Master unto thee: he shall dwell with thee, even among you in the place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him” (Deut. 23:15-16).

From this, we see that it would have been against the Law for Paul to arrange to force Onesimus, being a slave, back to his Master from whom he had absconded. However, that is not what he purposed to do: rather than to order a servant back to his master, he sent Onesimus back, as a brother, to be part of the ecclesia. So he appeals:

“Perhaps he departed from thee for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord” (Phil. 1:15-16).

Rather than to compel a slave to go back to his master, Paul sent Onesimus - who would have travelled back of his own free will – returning him to Philemon, as a fellow disciple and brother. There is a play on Onesimus’ name here. In the Greek it signifies *“profitable”*, and of Onesimus it is written that he was in times past *“to thee unprofitable”*. However, now Onesimus is returning as being *“now profitable to thee and to me”* (vs 11). Again, Philemon’s Name is derived from the word *phileo*, and signifies *“affection”* or *“love”*. Paul exhorts him to receive his former slave as *“a brother beloved ... both in the flesh, and in the Lord”* (Phil. 16).

It is a principle of Scripture that *“God loveth a cheerful giver”* (2 Cor. 9:7), and that *“if there first be a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not”* (2 Cor. 8:12). Paul therefore exhorted Philemon *“without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly”* (Phil. 1:14). Having Apostolic authority, Paul could have given a command (vs 8), but rather than Philemon having to obey a command, there was scope to show his willingness *“for love’s sake”*.

Here is a principle which is fundamental to our high calling in Christ: the display of willingness and love before the Almighty – reciprocating as it were, the love shown towards us in the Master laying down his life for his friends. *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus ... [who] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant ... he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”* (Philip. 2:5-8 – see context). Here is a willingness to make His Father’s Will his own: truly Messiah was a willing sacrifice, to redeem us from being disobedient servants, to become his Brethren through faith in His Name.

THE TEACHING OF THE LAW

There appears to be a precedent in the Law of Moses for a situation similar to that of Onesimus. Leviticus 9 reads:

“... if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt. I am Yahweh” (Lev. 19:33-34)

Here we see Onesimus as a stranger sojourning with the Apostle Paul, being instructed in the things of the Truth. And in an apparent reference to Baptism, Paul states "... yet for love's sake ... I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds" (Phi. 1:10). Just as a stranger - a Gentile - could be brought into a relationship with Yahweh as a son i.e. "one born among you", so the Gentile Onesimus could be brought from a servant to become a Son of the Living God, and a brother beloved to Paul an Philemon.

Again, Leviticus 25 states:

" if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee: thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant: but as an hired servant ..." (verse 39).

Here we have a comparable situation to that of Onesimus: a brother being accepted not as an unwilling slave, but as a hired servant, willing to serve his Master. Interestingly, in this same chapter, we have some ideas that are lifted out by the Apostle in his inspired writing to the Colossians. Compare the following:

"They shall not be sold as bondmen" (Lev. 25:42).

"Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour; but shalt fear thy God" (Lev. 25:43)

With Colossians chapter 4:

"Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a master in Heaven" (Col. 4:1).

There is a principle here: Masters were not to be overbearing to believing servants, but treat them as being themselves God-fearing servants, and recognizing that they have a Master in Heaven. The principle in both of these passages, is that brethren were not to be treated as slaves, but rather as willing hired servants, who could go free at the year of Jubilee.

OUR OWN POSITION

When we come to consider the spiritual import of the lessons that emerge from this epistle, we soon recognize that these three men (Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul) were a living parable. Acting out different roles in the situation, we have a reflection of our own situation. Once being unprofitable servants, we are begotten again through faith to become sons of the Living God.

Verse 11 of the Epistle speaks of Onesimus who was

"in time past to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me".

Compare the highlighted words with those used to describe Gentiles before they became believers:

"You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; ***wherein in time past*** ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in ***the children of disobedience***" (Eph. 2:1-2)

Again:

“they are all gone out of the way, they are together *become unprofitable*; there is none that doeth good, no. not one ...” (Rom. 3:12).

The reconciliation of Onesimus with his Master through the apostle Paul follows the pattern of our own reconciliation with Yahweh, through the operation of His Son:

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19).

It is our own reconciliation with God through Christ that we think upon each week, as we bread bread and drink wine to shew the Lord’s death till he come. There is another aspect that comes out from the Old Testament background to this epistle that foreshadows Messiah’s role as a servant. Verse 15 speaks of the servant being reconciled: “that thou shouldest *receive him for ever*”. This cites Exodus chapter 21, where we read of how a servant who wished to continue his service, rather than to go free on the 7th year.

“If the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out free: then his masters shall bring him unto the judges: he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and *he shall serve him for ever*” (See Exo. 21:1-6)

The point has been made many times that these things pointed towards Messiah himself as a voluntary servant who loved his Master and family. Psalm 40:6 is brought to bear on the matter:

“Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou digged (margin.) burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required”

Consider now these words as quoted by the Spirit in the New Testament:

“Wherefore when he came into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and Offering thou wouldest not, *but a body hast thou prepared me*: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure”

We can more readily see the reference to the Ear in relation to Exodus 21, than the “body prepared” of Hebrews chapter 10. What has “a body prepared” to do with a servant, his ear, and the door?

The marginal rendering of Exodus 21, and verse 3 might be helpful here:

“if he came in by himself (*marg. With his body*), he shall go out by himself: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him. If a master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master’s and he shall go out by himself” (Exod. 21:3-4).

The verses which follow describe what we have already seen, that he could choose to keep his wife and children by continuing his service.

What is the significance of “with his body”? How else could a servant come, if not “with his body?” The point being made here is that the servant is destitute. He has nothing to offer in service, but his own body. He had no riches, no means of redeeming himself: he was just as he stood. Even so our Master came by himself as “a body prepared”. There was nothing else he could give, there were no other offerings that his Master required. Jesus was the supreme example of a willing servant, who loved his family and remained faithful to his Master.

I WILL REPAY

There is another point that comes out of Philemon, again in connection with this Old Testament background, which reflects our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul, foreshadowing Christ, speaks of how Onesimus had sinned against his Master, and Paul’s willingness to make amends:

“If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I Paul have written it with mine own hand: I will repay it ...” (Phil. 1:18-19).

We have already considered the Old Testament circumstance being reflected here: a brother could choose to become a servant voluntarily, continuing to give “his body” in service. It would appear however, that Onesimus had sinned in some way against Philemon – in what way we do not know, other than it cost Philemon something, maybe money, or goods, or some other thing. In a similar way, we have sinned against Yahweh, and are in no position to redeem ourselves. Having being servants of sin, we need to be redeemed like the servant under the Law, and the purchase price is the blood of Christ:

“***ye are not your own*** ... for ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God ***in your body***, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Again:

“Ye are ***bought with a price***: be not ye the servants of men” (1 Cor. 7:23).

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the ecclesia of God, ***which he hath purchased with his own blood***” (Acts 20:28)

Like Onesimus, we are in need of redemption, and we are without strength to save ourselves. The Apostle Paul was willing to make up the deficiency of Onesimus’ sin against Philemon by his own hand. We are in a similar situation: we have sinned: in times past we were unprofitable servants – we are in need of redemption.

As the above citations show, there is a sense in which as believers, we are “bought” and “purchased”. Not as the churches teach, however. They teach that forgiveness is a kind of commercial transaction: a debt is owed, and is in need of being repaid. We cannot pay that debt ourselves, but Christ is able. The death of Christ is seen therefore, as paying the debt on our behalf. But the most significant flaw in this doctrine, is that there is no

forgiveness. The debt is not forgiven, it still has to be paid, and although somebody has paid for us – the debt itself was never forgiven, just paid by a different person.

By contrast, Salvation through the grace of Yahweh is different; there is forgiveness with Him that he might be feared. By faith and trust in His Anointed, though we will still die (unless we remain until the coming of Messiah again), we can find true love and forgiveness in the sight of the Almighty.

Returning to Philemon, we find that the Old Testament background is of a man who is a slave because of dire circumstances, such as poverty etc. But he can be redeemed from his master (sin) by the payment of a price. Our Master pays the price for our redemption: not the payment of debt, but by a different figure: the purchase of that which previously belonged to King Sin. The issue is not that of a debt being paid by a third party instead of forgiveness, but rather redemption accomplished by the sacrifice of Messiah. King Sin has multitudes of people following after him, but Christ has paid a price in order to deliver us from him. The condemnation of sin, and a declaration of the righteousness of God are vital aspects of forgiveness according to Scripture. Just as under the Law, a man could be redeemed from a servant by the payment of a price, even so we are “bought with a price” from King Sin, who pays nothing but death as wages to those who obey him.

The central theme of this epistle is that of reconciliation. Philemon was exhorted to receive a repentant servant as a brother, not a bondsman. Just as Paul was instrumental in bringing about a reconciliation between the master and his servant, even so For Christ’s sake, we are forgiven for those “unprofitable” sins, committed “in times past” and reconciled to God. But in considering these things, and the example of Philemon, we have a powerful exhortation to be reconciled with our brethren and sisters with whom we are at odds with. The example of Onesimus is also a powerful exhortation: although he ran away from his master, he did not seek after the things of this life, but rather by some undisclosed means, met up with the Apostle Paul. That meeting must have been a wonderful experience, and it concluded that Onesimus could not forsake his responsibilities towards the one whom he had deserted. He had to go back, but as a forgiven brother, and no longer an unprofitable servant. Considering these things, we each have to determine how we individually fit the types in this brief epistle. For those who wish to be reconciled to their Master, we can give attention to no better than the example of Onesimus who became no longer “unprofitable”, but instead shows that there is always a way back. We must learn from the Apostle Paul, as did he, that seeking to follow the way of Truth we will become united with our Master, and rejoice with him for everlasting days.

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