

PHILEMON

TIME AD 53

Place: Paul's living quarters at School of Tyrannus in Ephesus

SCENE I

Paul and Philemon seated around dinner table.

Philemon: Thank you so much for seeing me. I am a merchant from Colosse. The teaching you have been giving here has been carried by your students all over Asia and has reached my home city of Colosse. I listen in on some of your sessions every time a business trip brings me here to Ephesus. You are always trying to persuade people in your audience that one Jesus Christ who was crucified 20 years ago is in fact alive. Why are you so highly motivated about this rather illogical message?

Paul: Let me give you some of my background. I was born in Tarsus. As a youth I came to Jerusalem and was educated at the feet of the renowned scholar and teacher Gamaliel. My education was not only greatly broadened but I learned more about the breadth and depth of my family's religion. Subsequently I developed a great zeal for furthering the teachings of the Law and the Prophets. My manner of life from my youth is well known by my people who will testify that I belonged to the most strict sect of my people, the Pharisees. Concerning the righteousness of the law I was blameless. My dedication to my religion was so great I sought authority from my religious superiors to imprison and put to death many followers of Jesus Christ.

One night, while on such a mission, as we were approaching Damascus, the voice of One identifying Himself as Jesus spoke to me saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the pricks."

Immediately I understood what He was talking about. On our travels both you and I have seen many innovations by ox cart drivers to keep the oxen from slowing down. One of the most effective we have seen is to have a row of sharp spikes placed on the front bed of the ox cart. If the ox slows down the momentum of the load keeps the cart moving and the spikes on the frame drive into the flesh of the oxen's flank. Generally the ox will lunge forward and keep the cart moving but occasionally an angry and frustrated ox will start kicking the spikes. The only result is to torture him as the spikes penetrate the soft part of his hoof causing further pain and bleeding. Sometimes the driver will prick the ox's flank with a sharp stick and the animal's response will be to hurt him further as he kicks the goading stick.

The Lord's portrait of me was perfect. Although I had great knowledge and zeal, I lacked wisdom. My mis-directed energy was spent murdering my own

countrymen and making widows of their innocent wives. I had made myself believe I was doing God a favor.

Secretly my mind told me that my action was not consistent with the morality of the law of God. My own heart had begun to condemn me. Secretly, I longed for the peace and radiance of countenance I had witnessed in a brilliant young man named Stephen. I consented to his death by holding his outer garments when he was stoned to death for angering our religious leaders. His brilliant oration in his own defense contained logic and sincerity not easily erased from my memory.

Now, back to the Damascus road -- upon hearing Christ's commanding yet compassionate tone of voice, my response to Him was immediate, "LORD, what do you want me to do?"

I think I had always believed that learning was the answer to inward fulfillment in life. Although there have hardships and testings since that life changing moment, my inner life has been one of joy unspeakable and a fulfilling peace that passes all understanding.

Philemon: "I find it easy to identify with you. My consuming passion has always been to make money. I have achieved that goal. But material success has not brought what you have just described. There is emptiness in my heart which having wealth, palaces, and servants just don't satisfy."

Paul: "I have noticed you in the crowd and have sensed a response in your heart and countenance as you have listened to the Scriptures. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is indeed alive, that He is not only that promised prophet but is in reality the Son of God?"

Philemon: "I am convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, that He is alive, that He is the Son of God."

Paul: This same Jesus said He came to give His life a ransom for sin. Do you believe that if you invite Him to be your Savior that He will forgive your sins give you eternal life and give you the resources you need to live as you should?"

Philemon: "I believe every thing you have been teaching in the past and all you have added today. How do I personally appropriate the benefit of Christ's death on the cross?"

Paul: "Is Christ knocking at your heart's door right now?"

Philemon: "He definitely is. His presence with us is very real."

Paul: "I am going to pray a prayer phrase by phrase. If you can wholeheartedly do so repeat each phrase after me."

"Heavenly Father I thank you for offering me your Son."

Philemon: "Heavenly father I thank you for offering me your Son."

Paul: "I do here and now receive Him."

Philemon: "I do here and now receive Him."

Paul: "I invite the Lord Jesus to come into my heart, to forgive my sins, and to give me everlasting life."

Philemon: "I invite the Lord Jesus to come into my heart, to forgive my sins, and to give me everlasting life."

Paul: "In Jesus name, Amen."

Philemon: "In Jesus name, Amen."

Paul: "Did He come into your heart."

Philemon: "He most certainly did."

Paul: "It is now ten o'clock. I want to spend the next two hours talking about some things which will help you as a new Christian. Can you then spend the night and we will spend some more time together before you leave in the morning."

Philemon: "Sounds wonderful to me. Let's do it."

*****CURTAIN*****

SCENE II

Same room. Breakfast has just been finished. Philemon dressed for traveling.

Philemon rises and shakes hands with Paul.

Philemon: I am very grateful to you, Paul, for introducing me to Christ. I owe all my life to you from that moment. In our home my wife Apphia and I have a comfortable guest room. Just as soon as you can we invite you to come over and see us and meet our son Archippus. I was thinking last night how great it will be for us to open our spacious home for the Christians to meet in since a good meeting place is so hard to find.

But more important, I have had more joy the last few hours than my money and success has brought me in my entire lifetime... I want to use it to help others find Christ. As a businessman I have learned to be practical. It takes money for you to live and travel. Here is a letter of credit. It authorizes you to draw up to \$50,000 from my account as you need it. And as soon as that is gone I will replenish it."

Paul: "I am reluctant to accept it. The Lord has always provided for all of my needs. I will accept your generous offer but not promise to use it. I am confident He will continue to perfect the good work He has begun in you. Good bye until we meet again."

*******CURTAIN*******

ACT II

SCENE I

Time 48 AD. Early morning. Outside Office in Colosse. Sign on office door:

**ONESIMUS.
Treasurer, Financial Comptroller
PHILEMON ENTERPRISES**

Onesimus opens door and grabs a money box. He proceeds to fill a carpet bag with paper money and coins. He peers out the door and looks both ways. He sneaks out, dressed for traveling, as he hurries some of the money drops on the floor. As he leaves we hear the hoof beats of a rapidly departing traveler.

ACT III

SCENE I

Time 48 AD.

Scene: Paul's prison cell Rome.

Paul is hovering over a small fire in the poorly lighted cave like cell.

Approaching footsteps and a knock on the door is heard.

Paul: "Please enter."

A Roman soldier appears.

Soldier: "I have a pitiful looking man outside who says you know his employer and he badly needs to see you. You never turn any one away but this character is different. Do you want to see him or shall I give him the boot?"

Paul: "Where does he say he is from?"

Soldier: "All the way from Greece, Colosse."

Paul: "Bring him in."

Paul greets Onesimus.

Onesimus: "My name is Onesimus which you will recognize means "useful." I was born in Macedonia. I got all of the schooling I could and became an apprentice accountant. Then the Romans came in and captured my city and sold all of us into slavery. I was purchased by Philemon-----"

Paul interrupting: "I thought I had seen you before. It was at Philemon's house."

Onesimus: "Yes. I remember seeing you. You really made a different man out of Philemon. I know how much you helped him. That is the reason I came to see you so you can help me. I am in big trouble."

Paul: "Continue on with your story."

Onesimus: I have worked for Philemon for the past ten years. He trusted me and gave me a responsible position. After he met you in Ephesus four years ago his attitude about money people and even his slaves changed. He freely talked about faith in Christ and urged all of us to become Christians. Many did. There were always meetings going on his house. They had regular church services. I saw the change in the lives of many of the household but did not become a Christian. I was too bitter about God allowing me to become a slave."

Paul: "Then what happened?"

Onesimus: The Christian atmosphere of Philemon's household convicted my heart and increased my rebellion. I decided to desert. To avoid being captured I knew I needed money. So I stole not only enough to travel but to live it up the way the wealthy do. Eight months ago I finally got to Rome. I have squandered all of the money. I am hungry, broke, miserable and without any friends. You are the only one to whom I can turn."

Paul: "Peter once repeated a story to me he had heard from Jesus. It was about a man who could be your cousin. He spent all of his inheritance in wild living in the big city and ended up eating pig's food. But the story had a fantastically happy ending and there must be one for you too."

Onesimus: "I am desperate. Can you help me?"

Paul: "Your real sin is against God. You need His forgiveness. The Heavenly Father ran to meet the returning prodigal I already told you about. Do you understand what Jesus has done for you, what He is offering you and what He wants you to do?"

Onesimus: "Yes, I have known the truth for some time but the bitterness in my heart has kept me in rebellion and brought me to spiritual and emotional and physical disaster."

Paul: "Let's pray right now. You pray first and then I will pray."

Onesimus: "Heavenly Father, I thank you for offering me your Son to die for my sins. I do here and now receive Him and Lord Jesus, I thank you for dying on the cross for me, I invite You to come into my heart to forgive my sins and give me everlasting life. I am ready to turn from my old life of sin and rebellion. In Jesus name, Amen"

Paul: Heavenly Father, the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, thank you so much for bringing Onesimus to this point and for his turning to you for forgiveness and adoption in your family. Now that he belongs to you, we asked for your help and wisdom in deciding how he is to spend his life from this time on. Thank you for doing exceedingly above all we are able to ask or think. We pray in our Savior's name and for His glory, Amen."

Paul: "I am going to spend the next hour giving you helpful information the Lord has given me to help you grow. We will want to spend all the time together we can for the next few days."

Ten Days later.

Paul: "We been meeting for more than a week and have discussed what you should do in the future. You can see this is a struggle for me as I want to do what is right for both of my spiritual sons, Philemon and you. Philemon has promised to do anything I asked but I do not want to take advantage of him. My sense of rightness is that you must go back to Colosse and give yourself up to Philemon trusting him to do what is right."

Onesimus: "The very thought fills my heart with fear. I have committed two crimes each of which carries the death penalty. Philemon can have me killed as soon as I show up. I want to do what God wants me to do but I don't think this a good idea."

Paul: Picks up a scroll and quill pen and starts writing. After a little while he pauses and addresses Onesimus.

Paul: I have just written a note for you to hand carry to Colosse and deliver to Philemon. I think it will incline his heart to do what is right. I will read part of it to you to see what you think."

Paul reads from the scroll he has written:

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then as, Paul, an old man a now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ -- I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him -- who is my very heart -- back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so

that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was so that you might have him back for good -- no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother. He is very dear to me both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back -- not to mention that you owe me you're very self."

Paul: "What do you think Onesimus? You see I reminded him to take the money you stole out of the account he set up for me."

Onesimus: "Your letter is very persuasive. I hope it will influence him to treat me with mercy rather than the justice I deserve."

Paul: "I will see you again tomorrow and every day until you leave."

A week later

In the jail cave. Onesimus dressed for traveling. Paul hands him the scroll.

Paul: "We have prayed much about what I feel is the right decision. I will continue to pray often. Let me know Philemon's response when you can."

They embrace warmly and Onesimus departs.

ACT IV

SCENE I

The porch on Philemon's Colosse mansion with Philemon and family relaxing around the coffee table.

A messenger comes on the porch and says:

"Sir, Onesimus has come back to town and is heading toward the house."

Philemon: "Tell Dionysus to get out the chains and get guards ready. They will soon have a prisoner."

Onesimus approaches the porch and Philemon gives him a stern look. And says, "You thieving, ungrateful scoundrel. I trusted you and you let me down."

Philemon motions the guard to bind the arms of Onesimus.

Onesimus holds up the scroll. "I have a personal letter from Paul for you."

Philemon: "Paul? I don't believe it. You don't know him. How could you have a letter from him for me?"

Onesimus hands the scroll to Philemon.

Philemon skeptically unrolls the scroll with Apphia looking over his shoulder.

Philemon begins reading aloud:

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace to you and peace to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.

(Philemon pauses and beams at the good words.)

I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you may have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love."

Philemon: "Paul is asking a favor of me?"

"I then, as Paul -- an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ -- I appeal to you for my son Onesimus who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him -- who is my very heart -- back to you. I would have liked to have kept him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a while was that you might have him back for good -- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."

Philemon scowls and looks at Apphia. He raises his voice.

"Do you understand what Paul is asking? He wants me to take Onesimus back. I believe he also wants me to forgive him, to give him his job back. And that is not all. He wants me to release him from being a slave and give him his freedom.

And, I can't believe it. He wants me to adopt him into our family as a son and joint heir of all we have to share with our own sons and daughters."

Philemon paces back and forth.

Apphia: "He also reminds you that you owe your eternal existence with God to him. He isn't forcing you. He is only asking you to do what is right and to be a good testimony to those who meet in our house. Don't let the loss of some money and the injured pride of Onesimus's desertion affects your judgment. Christ gave up far more for you than He is asking you to do for Onesimus."

(Philemon struggles with his conscience. He then motions to Onesimus to come to him and they embrace. Apphia joins the embrace.)

Philemon: "Welcome into our family, my brother, my son."

Apphia: to servant. "Get the guest room ready. The reception we planned for Paul will now be given to honor Onesimus."

To another servant. "Make a place for Onesimus at our family table. He will be eating with us from now on."

*****CURTAIN*****

EPILOGUE

By Narrator or in printed program.

After viewing this great human interest drama, we reflect on the meaning. Of all the experiences of pre- New Testament personalities, why did God choose to preserve this account and make it a part of the Bible? What is the message God is trying to communicate? Is this book an allegory as well as a factual historical event? The answer may lie in some questions and answers about the three principal characters:

The story has been told of a young Swedish man who decided to immigrate to the United States in its early history and make his fortune. His mother sold many of her possessions and greatly sacrificed to make the voyage possible. In his letters back to his mother he reported that he was indeed becoming very prosperous.

But the neighbors were worried. Her clothes were getting more threadbare and she seemed undernourished. And they wondered if she had enough fuel to keep warm. So a delegation of neighbor women called on her.

"How is your son doing?" They asked.

She gave a glowing report.

The women: "If he is prospering why doesn't he share with you? You sacrificed for him and now you don't have enough money to live on."

With a typical mother's love and approval she replied, "I have wondered that too, but I know he has good reasons and I trust him."

"Does he ever send you anything but letters?" one neighbor asked.

"Oh yes," she replied, "those Americans must be very proud of their heroes and make a lot of pictures of them. In every letter he sends me some pictures of great Americans."

"What have you done with them? was the next question.

"Oh, I have kept all of them and have them here in a desk drawer, she answered."

The women asked, "could we see some of them?"

The Swedish lady opened the drawer and produced a bundle of green oblong pieces of American currency displaying pictures of Jackson, Hamilton and other great Americans. Since she couldn't read English she viewed the bills only as pictures. Not knowing the value behind the pictures she was unnecessarily living in poverty.

So are those who regard the Bible only as literature, history or ethics. They may be starving and uninformed spiritually. Who is behind the "pictures" we have seen in Philemon?

Who does Philemon really represent?

Answer: He represents God the Father in His judicial role. Philemon had the right and authority under existing laws to sentence Onesimus to death for each of his capital crimes.

Who does Paul represent?

Answer: He obviously represents Jesus Christ in His substitutionary role as Savior and His intercessory role having been raised from the dead for our justification.

Who does Onesimus represent?

Answer: You -- me -- the whole human race in our sinful role having earned the penalty of death by following the desires of our fallen, unregenerate nature. "The wages of sin is death." Romans 6:23

The following has been called the deepest question in all theology:

"If God knew, and certainly He did know, the great tragedy that would result from the entrance of sin into the world, WHY DID HE ALLOW SIN TO INTRUDE INTO THE HUMAN RACE? Every one of us is touched daily and often tragically by sin.

A most revealing clue is found in Philemon, verse 15 as we substitute the PERSONS of which Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul are types:

"Perhaps the reason (the human race) was separated from GOD for a little while was that (God) might (have those who become Christians) back forever, not now as a slaves of sin, but adopted into God's family and made heirs of God and joint heirs of Jesus Christ."

Is there any doubt that the latter status of Onesimus was better than the first? In Christ we have more than Adam lost. His continuing life was conditioned on obedience. Our eternal life in Christ is a free gift.

Couldn't God have found a better way to transfer our status from servants to sons? We are sure He could have but just as sure He didn't.

As sons and daughters we have privileges and obligations a servant does not have. We have immediate access to our Father. We are joint heirs with Christ and have all of the possessions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We also have the obligation to honor the family name and perpetuate it.

As Paul wrote in Galatians 4:6-7, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."

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