
Ministry Meeting

Philemon -- Jeremiah 33

April 4, 2010

Opening Reading -- The Epistle to Philemon

Philemon 1-25

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house... I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints... I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels... For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 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? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. 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... Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thine obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

Repentance: Taking Sides with God Against Ourselves

This short epistle of twenty-five verses has much to say about repentance. Onesimus had been a slave in the household of Philemon. He ran away -- under the cloud, perhaps, of something owed to his master. Things went from bad to worse, and he ended up in prison at Rome. We know this because Paul was himself a prisoner at Rome, and verse 10 says he had begotten Onesimus in his bonds: they were in the same place. The Apostle Paul, who had done nothing worthy of imprisonment, preached the gospel to this man who was there under the consequences of his own choices. And Onesimus repented and believed.

Repentance is not merely a change of feeling or a change of resolution. It is the changing of one's mind so as to take sides with God against oneself. Something of the same character as the trespass offering of the Mosaic law, where restitution was required -- and not just restitution, but twenty percent above the original loss. Onesimus had taken something away from Philemon: himself. His own service, his obedience, his labor. He could not return twenty percent more than what he had withheld. But he could return as a man with a changed heart -- no longer a runaway slave, but, as Paul says in verse 16, a brother beloved.

The Letter of Commendation

This is the longest -- and certainly among the sweetest -- letters of commendation in the New Testament. Romans 16 commends Phoebe in a few sentences. This epistle is entirely devoted to the commendation of one man. And notice what it commends. It says nothing of his skills or occupation or useful abilities. Was he a carpenter? A metalworker? A weaver? We do not know. Not a word of that kind appears. What does the letter say? He was begotten in bonds, verse 10. He was born again. He repented of his sins. He believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as his own personal Savior. That is what makes a letter of commendation real.

Why Onesimus Had to Go Back into That House

The assembly at that place was meeting in the house of Philemon (verse 2). That means that when Onesimus returned to that city, he had to return not just to the town where people knew him, not just to the neighborhood -- but to the very house where he had been a slave and from which he had fled. He had to knock on the door of the house of the very man he had wronged and stand there and say: I have a letter for you. One can picture him shuffling his feet in the street outside, thinking: I don't want to go in there. The guilt of what he had done was still in his own heart, making him uncomfortable in their presence -- though it was he, not they, who had done the wrong.

There are at least three reasons why he had to go in. The smallest of the three is the demonstration of genuine repentance. True repentance shows itself in honest reckoning with the consequences of what was done. Onesimus had taken himself away from Philemon -- he owed a debt he could not fully repay, but at a minimum he had to bring himself back. And the man who came back was something far better than what had been taken away: not a reluctant slave, but a beloved brother.

The Lord Jesus Is in the Midst of His Assembly

The second reason -- and by far the greater -- is that the Lord Jesus Christ was in the midst of His assembly in that house. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' When Onesimus ran away from Philemon's house, he was running away from the Lord's table and the Lord's presence in the assembly at that place. And one of the great principles of Scripture is that the place of departure is the place of recovery -- not in every case geographically, but morally and spiritually. A soul will never truly be restored unless it has been brought back to the same spiritual point from which it departed, to repent of the departure itself.

Could Onesimus have gone to a different neighborhood in that city and started a new breaking of bread there, on the other side of the marketplace from Philemon's house? In one sense, physically, perhaps he could have found other believers and met with them. But that would not have been the same Lord's table, because the Lord Jesus Himself was in the midst of His assembly over at Philemon's house -- and it was from there that Onesimus had departed. Whatever the house was like in outward appearance, if the Lord Jesus was there, the windows of heaven were open over it. That is why Onesimus had to go back. Not for comfort or convenience, but because of the excellence and authority of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of His own assembly.

Two Who Had to Act: Onesimus and Philemon

In verse 20, Paul writes: 'Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in the Lord.' Paul calls Philemon brother, and says it will give him joy when Philemon receives Onesimus. But two people had to act for that joy to come about -- not just one. Onesimus had to walk down that street, stand before that door, and knock. And Philemon had to read this letter and receive his former runaway slave as a beloved brother in the Lord. The reception required both: the one who had to return and the one who had to receive.

Prepare Me a Lodging: Paul's Doctrine at Home

Verse 22 adds a remarkable line: 'Withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.' Is that verse there simply to tell us where Paul planned to sleep? Or does it carry a deeper sense? Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, the one through whom we have received the great doctrines of the one body of Christ, our heavenly position, and all the distinctive truths that flow from his epistles -- when he is received, it means his doctrine is valued. It means there is a place where his gospel has its home, where the name

of the Lord Jesus Christ is honored in the way that Paul taught. That gives joy to the apostle's heart. The assembly that has such a character is one where Paul's lodging is prepared in a real and spiritual sense.

Jeremiah 33: The Branch of Righteousness -- The Gathering Center

Jeremiah 33:1-3, 6-9, 14-16

And the word of Jehovah came to Jeremiah the second time, while he was still shut up in the court of the prison, saying, Thus saith Jehovah the Maker of it, Jehovah that formed it to establish it; Jehovah is his name: Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and I will show thee great and hidden things which thou knowest not... Behold, I will apply a healing dressing to it, and will cure them, and will reveal unto them an abundance of peace and truth... I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned against me, and whereby they have transgressed against me. And it shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth... In those days and at that time will I cause a Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land. In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely; and this is the name wherewith she shall be called: Jehovah our righteousness.

In the case of Onesimus, it was a voluntary departure under a moral cloud. In the case of Israel in Jeremiah's day, the departure was not voluntary -- it was God's judicial ejection from the land on account of great and prolonged unfaithfulness. The cloud was of a different kind, but the same principle applied: a moral departure from the place of blessing, with a restoration that must come through the Lord's own work and grace.

The gathering center for Israel in that coming day -- the millennial day -- is the same one who is the gathering center for us now: the Branch of righteousness who grows up to David, who executes judgment and righteousness in the land, who will be called 'Jehovah our righteousness.' Whether the saint is heavenly, as Onesimus had become, or earthly, as the Jews will yet be when God takes up His program with them again -- the center is always the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the gathering center for both His heavenly and His earthly people, now and forever. Then at the end, having faithfully executed the thousand years, He will turn over the kingdom to the Father, that God may be all in all.

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Lord willing.