

HEART OF CHRIST

Philemon 1-25

Key Verses: 10,11

"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."

There are 66 books in the Bible. Philemon is just one short page of a letter. But it is included as one book of the Bible. It is indeed amazing that a one-page letter is included as one of the 66 Bible books, beating out such excellent books of Apocrypha. It is because the letter reveals the heart of Christ as well as the heart of Paul. Suppose someone has no heart. Then he cannot be a man. As long as one has a heart, he can be a man. This letter reveals the heart of Jesus so tearfully that this one-page letter was highly recommended and included in the canon. Paul taught basic Christianity to all the believers. And he himself put what he taught into practice. This one page book reveals the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ (1). As we know, Paul was Saul, which meant "the greatest." He was humanly ambitious. Even though he was under the oppression of the Roman Empire, he wanted to be the number-one man in the future in his Jewish community. This caused him to approve Stephen's execution so as to be more recognized by the Jewish authorities (Ac 8:1). One day he was on the road to Damascus to arrest the early Christians. Suddenly the heavenly sunshine shone upon him. At that moment he heard the voice of the Risen Jesus, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Ac 9:4). Immediately Paul fell from the horse and lay prostrate on the muddy ground. His eyes were blinded. But his spiritual eyes were opened and he could see the Risen Christ. Before the Risen Christ, he realized that he was not a great man but a terrible sinner, and that Jesus is the Savior of the world. The

Risen Christ appointed him as the apostle to the Gentiles and he lived gloriously for his mission all his life.

Second, house church (2). Look at verses 1b-2. "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." Paul learned that fellow Christians are all equal with him. He also learned the humbleness of Jesus. In verse 2, "Apphia" means "prosperous." She was a woman. And "Archippus," means "master of the house." He was a man. Paul also came to realize that fellow Christians are the soldiers of Jesus Christ. So he said in verse 2, "fellow soldier." We are chosen to fight against the powers of darkness (Eph 6:12). Therefore, Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:3, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." They were called to fight against the ungodly people of the times.

The last part of verse 2, "...to the church that meets in your home," has a very important meaning. In the early Christian age there was no church building. Anyone who was identified as a Christian was arrested and beaten to death. So they worshiped God in their houses. The best example is Aquila and Priscilla. This family once immigrated to Rome and was deported. They went back to Rome and were again deported. Nevertheless, wherever they went, they invited people and worshiped God. Once, there was Apollos, who was an excellent Bible teacher. But he knew only the baptism of John the Baptist. So Aquila and Priscilla invited him to their home and taught him the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the living hope of the kingdom of God and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Definitely, each house must be established as a house church. Paul recognized several faithful Christians as the absolute majority, for one Christian man is better than 100,000 corrupted men. A house church is the essential part of the church of Christ. Look at verse 3. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul teaches us that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the peace of God should be in our

souls. In verses 4-7, Paul thanks God for the members of Philemon's church. Paul always remembered them in his prayer because he heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for the saints. Look at verses 4-5. "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's house was Philemon's church. Those who came to the church grew in faith in God as well as in the love of God.

What is love? God is love (1Jn 4:16). God gave his one and only Son to save us from our sins. We did not love God first. God loved us first (1Jn 4:19). When we believe in the love of God we feel we are very much loved. And when we love God we can love our neighbor. When we love God, we have happiness in our souls.

Paul knew that they were growing in faith and love. But Paul encourages them to put what they know into practice. When they practice faith and love, they can understand spiritual things in Jesus (6). Paul, who was in prison, compliments them that they gave him joy and encouragement and refreshment because of their growing faith and love.

Third, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus" (8-16). Now, Paul comes to his main point of writing a letter to Philemon. Look at verse 8. "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do..." Paul was a spiritual father to them and he had authority over them to tell them to "do this" and "do that." But he did not use his spiritual authority over them. He appealed to them. He is really a humble man. He was in prison. His old body ached. He had many needs. But he did not write a petition for himself. But he wrote a petition for his one to one Bible sheep.

What kind of petition did he make? There was a man named Onesimus, meaning, "useful man." At that time, there were many satellite countries which surrounded the Roman Empire. All the

young men wanted to go to Rome out of their curiosity and to satisfy their ambition.

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon. He stole some money from his master and ran away to Rome. In Rome, unfortunately, he was arrested and put in prison. But by God's providence, he became a prison-mate of St. Paul. At that time, St. Paul was all by himself. But he met Onesimus. He took care of him as his own dear son. Through St. Paul's babysitting and teaching the Bible, this runaway slave was gradually changed. He was once a useless man. But he became a useful man by means of Paul's one-to-one Bible teaching. As his name "Onesimus" meant, he became a useful man. There was a very intellectual missionary. At first she wanted to be a missionary to Harvard University. But she stayed in Chicago. She met a Northwestern University student who had a bright mind. But since his parents divorced, he became a man of sorrow. The young man did not take care of himself. So his sister took care of him. He ate only bloody raw meat. He walked around in his bare feet in the winter snow. At that time the woman missionary took care of him with all her heart. Then the young man could finish at Northwestern and marry a woman of prayer.

Paul wanted Onesimus to be a wholesome man. Paul wanted to restore his social position. So Paul wanted to send him back to Philemon. Paul appealed to Philemon, saying that once Onesimus was useless, but now he is a useful man. Paul emphasizes that he is a changed man. Look at verses 10-12. "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." In the first part of verse 12, Paul said, "I am sending him--who is my very heart..." Paul gave all his heart to Onesimus. Paul loved Onesimus as he loved God. So he said, "...who is my very heart...." It may have been that Paul's heart was broken many times in the course of helping Onesimus. It is more than sure that Paul was tired and

weary in the course of helping him. Paul is like a four-star general in one-to-one Bible study. But in caring for one wretched person he is like a mother.

Fourth, welcome him as your own brother (17-21). Paul firmly believed that Philemon and the fellow Christians there would welcome Paul as a partner of the gospel of Jesus. Paul also believed that they would accept Onesimus as a Christian brother. But the system and mentality of the time did not allow a slave to act like a brother. On top of this, those who stole the master's money and ran away were supposed to die or be severely punished. Onesimus had stolen money from Philemon and run away.

Paul urges Philemon to cancel the debt by remembering the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Look at verses 17-18. "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." In actuality, Paul was in prison. Paul could not pay the debt back for Onesimus, for he had no money. But he appealed to Philemon to cancel his debt. A graceful shepherd, St. Paul, in short, wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus with respect and honor and not punish him. From Philemon's point of view, it was totally impossible. But Paul said, "He is my heart" (12).

Onesimus was nothing but an ex-slave and thief and prisoner and a man of no hope of marriage. At best, he could be reinstated as a slave, if not imprisoned. But Paul asked them to accept him, not as a slave, but as a brother, with respect and love. If they did so, Paul would be happy and his heart would be refreshed in Christ. Paul had the heart of Christ. Paul cared for Onesimus, not because he was a possible future leader, but because he loved him in Jesus.

Paul was in prison. Humanly speaking, Paul was old. He had come to Rome to evangelize the Roman Empire, but his dream seemed to have been shattered. So Paul could not have any space

in his heart for Onesimus. But Paul loved him with all his heart. Paul was too old to write with his own hand. But he wrote with his own hand to show how much he loved Onesimus. Look at verse 21. "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."

Fifth, prepare a guest room for me (22). Look at verse 22. "And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers." As we have thought about, Paul was in a Roman prison. He was in chains. He was old. Rome was a foreign country. His destiny seems to be like a flickering candlelight before the wind. In this situation, Paul could not hope for anything. He could not do anything. If he were an ordinary person, he would only worry about bloody hands injured by the chain and be very sorry for his skin. But in this verse we don't find any hint of fatalism or sorrow in the heart of St. Paul. Rather he was full of vision. He was hoping that he would be freed from prison and go all around the world and proclaim the gospel of Jesus and evangelize the whole world. Paul's real intention to go to Philemon's church was to see that Onesimus was accepted with respect and love.

Finally Paul introduces fellow prisoners in Christ Jesus: First, Mark, meaning "unstable man;" Aristarchus, meaning "good steward;" Luke, meaning "shining." Luke was a Gentile. He had no reason to be in prison. But for the sake of Jesus, he had been a personal doctor for St. Paul. Mark was a slippery person. But he was changed and imprisoned together with St. Paul. St. Paul was in prison and was considered as a traitor. Paul was treated like a prisoner. But his love for God prevailed over everything. Because he loved God he loved one lost soul with all his heart. We cannot deny that he had the heart of Christ. May God help us love many Onesimuses. May God give us the heart of Jesus Christ. We must have something to live in this world. But to us to have the heart of Christ is the most important because it helps us overcome all the

7

hardships and sufferings and keeps us in the peace of God.