

Two Brief Notes

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I

Philemon

Introduction

The book of Philemon is a small theological masterpiece and not only a personal note on a friend's behalf or a statement on the evils of slavery. Nor does the value of the book for Christians today reside merely in the fact that it is a genuine Pauline document from the first century--an artifact of our heritage to be preserved in deference to a great apostle. On the contrary, Philemon makes its own unique theological contribution to the New Testament. Its value lies in what it illustrates for us about the doctrine and practice of sanctification.

Some Background

In Philemon Paul appeals to the master of a runaway slave named Onesimus, who has either stolen or damaged some property in the process of leaving and who then by some means finds his way to Rome. While enjoying his new anonymity in the capital, Onesimus comes into contact with Paul. It is not impossible that this should happen by accident, but it is unlikely. Rome was a large city by ancient standards and Paul was under house arrest. When another individual, Onesiphorus, came to Rome with the express purpose of finding Paul he was only able to accomplish his goal after a long and difficult search.

May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. (17) On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. (2 Tim 1:16-17)

Thus, it is more likely that Onesimus found Paul because he looked for him. He might have wanted nothing more than to see a familiar face, but he probably also realized that Paul was a person who would not betray a confidence and that he would help if he could.

Onesimus' acquaintance with Paul went back to a time before he had run away. His master Philemon had been converted under Paul's preaching in the town of Colossae and when the present letter was written the church at Colossae was meeting in Philemon's home (Phlm 23; Col 4:17). But Onesimus did not accept Christ at the same time as his master. He became a Christian only later after fleeing to Rome. Paul writes, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains" (Phlm 10; but see Col 4:9).

Now a Christian himself the slave decides to return home of his own free will and to try to make his wrongs right. Paul's object in writing was to encourage Philemon to accept this offer of good will and to be reconciled with Onesimus.

Message of Philemon

The message of Philemon is significant from a number of perspectives. Below I suggest four different ways to approach the material, each building on the one before it: (1) the historical context of Paul's appeal for Onesimus, (2) what that appeal says about Paul, (3) what Paul's experience says about us, (4) and what factors operated to bring about the changes in Paul's life that we find so impressively documented both in this letter and elsewhere.

Level 1: The historical situation

Theologically the value of Philemon has nothing to do with Philemon, or Onesimus, and little if anything to do with the institution of slavery. Paul does not address the issue of slavery here, nor does he directly appeal for Onesimus' freedom.¹

In all of this we must endeavor to read Philemon from Paul's point of view and to see the situation as the writer saw it. It is part of good exegesis to do that. But if our goal is merely to understand the original historical situation, the task will not occupy us for long. The letter is brief and the situation addressed in it is fairly straightforward.

There were those in the early church who argued that Philemon should be excluded from the canon "because it was not devoted to edification" and because it was a personal letter rather than an epistle written to benefit the whole church.² Thus, it is possible to value Philemon as being genuinely Pauline and yet to see in it little if anything worth studying. But it is not necessary to stop with so limited an approach.

Level 2: Implications for Paul

There is another perspective that we can benefit from in addition to that of merely tracing the historical situation being addressed and when we adopt it the theological significance of the book becomes more clear. Having read Philemon from Paul's point of view we should then turn 180 degrees and follow the stream of thought back to its source. We should read the writer in what he has written--the white spaces on the page as well as the black. We must ask what the author's words imply and not only what they say. Philemon has much to teach us about Paul.

Paul's earlier life. We are fortunate in knowing a number of things about Paul's life. For example, as a young man he was an ardent and irrepressible enemy of the church.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (2) Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. (3) But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:1-3)

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest (2) and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

Paul's later life. There are no murderous threats, however, in Paul's letter to Philemon, nor could anyone accustomed to uttering them produce it. We must constantly bear in mind that this letter was not written to be widely read. Paul expects no public scrutiny of his words and would be surprised if he knew we were studying them. His sentiments in Philemon are unrehearsed and spontaneous--the product of a mind long accustomed now to thinking of how to benefit others rather than how to harm them (2 Cor 6:3-10; 11:16-29). It is an entirely different man who writes:

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, (9) yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. (Phil 8-9)

I would have liked to keep him [Onesimus] with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. (14) But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. (Phil 13-14)

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. (19) I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back--not to mention that you owe me your very self. (20) I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. (21) Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. (Phil 20-21)

Summary. There is an intense contrast between what Paul was like earlier in life and what he was like before his death. These things do not just happen. Something caused the change. In Paul's life we see the cumulative effects of believing and obeying Paul's gospel (Acts 26:19; 1 Cor 9:16). By his own experience the apostle shows us what the Holy Spirit can do with a very faulty individual when he is finally given over to do God's will completely, holding back nothing (Phil 4:4b-11).

Level 3: Implications for us

It was stated above that when we see Paul in the letter he wrote to Philemon the message of that letter takes on theological as well as historical interest. But the theological principles that we find at work there do not apply to a single individual alone. In this letter we have more than a testimony to Paul's personal kindness. The apostle's life should be viewed as a case study in sanctification. It illustrates a whole range of principles and shows what issues are properly dealt with under the heading of sanctification--what sorts of changes can be expected and the manner and degree to which they operate. Whether one feels that sanctification receives too much attention in the church or too little, the life of Paul is an example that must be studied in order to support one's case. Whatever conclusions we eventually reach, here is a basis for reaching them. Thus, because the principles of sanctification apply to us, Philemon has much to teach us, not only about Paul, but about ourselves.

Level 4: Insight on the process of change

There is another entire dimension to point out as we study the deeper lessons of Philemon. Paul experienced such dramatic changes in his life as a result of believing and

obeying the gospel of Christ and it is a change that the Holy Spirit can bring about in the life of any other converted man or woman. But the single most valuable lesson to be learned from Paul's case, as seen in the book of Philemon, is not the fact but the manner in which this change took place. To acknowledge that it did happen to Paul and can happen to us is one thing, but we cannot personally benefit from any of this unless we follow the same steps in our own experience that Paul did in his. And if we do not know what they are, we could go quite wrong in any attempt to benefit from Paul's example as a follower of Christ (Phil 4:9).

The traits of character we see in Paul's later life were not a product of conscious effort. Paul did not set about to become sanctified. That is not why he did what he did. There is a profound truth here that cries out to be grasped. Paul was not preoccupied with himself or with developing the traits of character that he developed. No one who was could have developed them. This is by far the single most significant lesson to learn from the book of Philemon. In Philemon we do not read the words of a person who for long years had tried--successfully--to live a holy life, but instead one who was so consumed with both love and labor for Christ that he had forgotten about his own interests in the process. These things do not happen in a day. One can do a selfless act, but the writer of Philemon is not one who merely did a selfless act. He is one who over an extended period of time poured himself out in ministry to other people in such a way that the doing of selfless acts had become something to take entirely for granted.

Thus, what for us might lie in the foreground of Christian experience, Paul moved to the background. And the great underlying facts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection that form the background for every aspect of our daily Christian experience, Paul moved into the foreground.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, (9) for which I am suffering to the point of being chained like a criminal. (2 Tim 2:8-9)

If sanctification had been Paul's object, even he could not have attained it (Phil 3:6; Rom 11:7-10). The changes we are talking about could not occur until they had ceased to preoccupy him. Then they did occur. There are some things we cannot do by doing them. Some things must come indirectly as the result of other processes. Sanctification is, and can only be, a byproduct of losing sight of ourselves--a benefit that comes to us only when we quit trying to make it come to us. Here is the genius of the beautiful character traits we read between the lines in Paul's letter to Philemon. He had sought God's kingdom first and, as he did, all these things were given to him as well (Matt 6:33). His close association with Christ had become evident in words, manner, and intent.

It is not bad to be good. Sanctification is not something from which God wishes to shield us. It is the natural result of coming humbly to God for forgiveness or for any other purpose. Here is why sanctification is the work of a lifetime.³ As we come to God for the blessings He has promised to give us, we are brought into contact with Him. And His presence has an influence on our lives that cannot leave us wholly unchanged. Over time this influence becomes perceptible. In this context there can be no such thing as sanctification by works. If there is sanctification at all, it is by faith.

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:6)

Conclusion

Paul has written more powerfully on justification than any other biblical writer has or could, but I submit that he has written on sanctification as well. He did this in the only way that it could be done effectively, i.e., indirectly and by practical example. The contribution that the Holy Spirit made to the churches through Paul's ministry is greater than we might have thought, and I would say it is greater by an order of magnitude. Paul left us no treatise specifically devoted to the topic of sanctification, telling us how to enjoy its benefits, or even outlining what they might be, but in the book of Philemon we have an even more useful form of comment. He left us an unrehearsed glimpse into his own experience.

What Paul reveals in this way about sanctification is useful not only for ourselves but also as we present the same truths to others. If we say this or that, then someone else will come forward and deny it. But if the practical results of what we say are allowed to speak for themselves, there is no room for contradiction. The argument of a changed life is unanswerable. Thus, if Paul had said, "The gospel changes people," someone else could counter by saying, "It does not change people." But when Paul appeals for Onesimus and shows us that the change has occurred in his own life, what can anyone say to contradict him?

Returning to my original point, Philemon should be studied for its theological content. It should receive careful attention from a doctrinal point of view. Correctly understood, it provides perhaps the clearest and most forceful statement in Scripture, outside the gospels, on the important doctrine of sanctification.

II

The Latter Rain

Introduction

"Latter rain" is a biblical term used by Seventh-day Adventists to describe a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church just before Christ returns. The term derives from the unique agricultural cycle of Palestine, where grains grow during the rainy winter months and are harvested after the last period of rain in the spring.⁴ The term "latter rain," or "spring rain," occurs in eight Old Testament passages.⁵ In the New Testament we find only the following:

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the fall and spring rains. (8) You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near (Jas 5:7-8).

Here James uses the growing season in Palestine as the basis for an illustration. What he describes with it is the time that must pass between Christ's ascension to heaven and His subsequent return to the earth in glory. It is an appropriate comparison. The Holy Spirit, which was poured out on the day of Pentecost at the beginning of the church's history, has been present in greater or lesser degree for almost two thousand years and before Christ comes again we can expect that the earlier outpouring will be repeated with even greater power than before.

Drawing on a similar agricultural analogy in one of His parables Christ once said, "The field is the world" (Matt 13:38; cf. John 4:35). Thus, the church is the crop and the life giving rain that makes the crop possible is the Holy Spirit. In this brief note I would like to explore one aspect of rain symbolism further.

The Role of the Individual

One morning recently I had occasion to walk in a very gentle rain--little more than a mist. Taking any one point on the ground as a reference, most of the rain was falling elsewhere. But each little spot received its drop and the result was that a broad area was watered.

As Christians it is our privilege and responsibility to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If each person in the church waits for someone else to receive the blessing first, everyone will wait and the ground will remain dry. So will our message. But if each individual prays to receive one drop now--and receives it--the effect on the church will multiply and the results will be dramatic.

As we pray for the Holy Spirit our requests need not be stated in such general terms that no actual request gets made. If at baptism a person has received a gift of the Spirit, it is entirely appropriate to pray for a strengthening of that particular gift to meet a specific need. The answer to such a prayer is like a single drop of the promised refreshing rain. On another occasion the prayer is repeated, again the blessing is received, and there is another drop. As the process is repeated by many individuals and eventually by a vast cross-section of the church in a fervent petition to God the shower falls and what was begun at Pentecost is abundantly repeated during the end time.

The Role of the Church

The Holy Spirit can be received now by individuals, but when the term "latter rain" is used the reference is not only to individuals. "Rain" is a collective term such that no one portion of ground, or person, receives more than a fraction of the whole.

Rain does not all fall on one spot. If it did, the one spot that received it would be washed away. In the same way, no one person could experience all the benefits of the latter rain by himself. It is more than one person could benefit from alone and failing to benefit that one individual its influence would be lost on the church. This brings us to a point that is commonly understood but needs to be remembered. Christ does not generally work by setting isolated individuals over against the church as a whole. After Paul was converted he spent the better part of three years in Arabia (Gal 1:17-18), but before going there his eyesight was restored by a member of the organized church in Damascus (Acts 9:6, 17-19). It was not God's purpose to make Paul's work a substitute for that of the other apostles, but to strengthen the whole body of Christ by the diverse working of the Holy Spirit in its varied members. Each member may receive part of the promised blessing.

Conclusion

It is not vain to pray for the gifts of wisdom and insight to understand the Scriptures. It is not egocentric to ask for a powerful influence over others on Christ's behalf. The gifts of the Spirit are things God wants the church to have. So when one prays for a specific need, and receives the Holy Spirit's help to meet that need, the broader requirements of the church as a whole are being addressed as well as those of the individual.

The latter rain is not a mystical experience reserved for some distant future time or for a small number of people. It is available to the church whenever the church will concertedly ask for it. We do not have to wait for the process to begin somewhere else. Indeed waiting prevents it from beginning. We can enjoy the refreshing influence of the Holy Spirit now. Each little spot, however insignificant, can receive its drop and the results will, under God's providence, be such that they can be fully seen and appreciated only in eternity.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹In the last century some critics said that Philem. was the work of a second century forger who wished to provide a Pauline ruling on the problem of slavery; but in that case Philem. would be a very clumsy forgery, for Paul does not clearly direct that Onesimus be set free" (Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1958], p. 420). In vs. 9 ("no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother") the intent is that Philemon should not regard Onesimus only as a slave, but also as a brother.

²Ibid.

³Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime. It is not gained by a happy flight of feeling, but is the result of constantly dying to sin, and constantly living for Christ" (*The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911], p. 560).

⁴See Hardy, "The Context for Ezra's Use of a Fall-to-Fall Calendar," *Historicism* No. 8/Oct 86, pp. 9, 57 (n. 29). "Most of Palestine's farmers depended on rain. The drought of a 6 months' summer ended with the 'early rains', and as soon as the sun-baked earth could be farmed (late November or December) the seed was broadcast and ploughed under. Sometimes the land was also ploughed before seeding. The heavy winter rains gave the crops their major moisture, but the 'latter rains' of March and April were needed to bring the grain to head" (*New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982), s.v. "Agriculture").

⁵There is a separate word for "latter rain, spring rain" in Hebrew, from *lāqāš*, "be late" (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958]), *fructus serotinos colligere* ("to gather late produce") (Solomon Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti concordantiae: Hebraicae atque Chaldaicae* [Leipzig: Veit, 1896]). The eight Old Testament passages that use the word *malqôš* are as follows: "[T]hen I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains [*ûmalqôš*], so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil" (Deut 11:14); "They waited for me as for showers and drank in my words as the spring rain" [*l'ûmalqôš*], (Job 29:23); "When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring [*malqôš*]" (Ps 16:15); "Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains [*ûmalqôš*] have fallen" (Jer 3:3); "They do not say to themselves, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives fall and spring rains [*ûmalqôš*] in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest'" (Jer 5:24); "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge

him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains [*k^emalqôš*] that water the earth" (Hos 6:3); "Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you a teacher for righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains [*ûmalqôš*], as before" (Joel 2:23); "Ask the Lord for rain in the springtime [*malqôš*]; it is the Lord who makes the storm clouds. He gives showers of rain to men, and plants of the field to everyone" (Zech 10:1).