

TRANSFORMED!
The Epistle To Philemon

Intro: One of the most delightful of all of Paul's letters is this epistle to his friend in Colosse, Philemon.

It is entirely a letter of commendation--Paul commending Onesimus to Philemon.

No particular doctrine is being taught. Nothing is being corrected in the way of error. It is simply written by Paul to solve a problem which existed between Philemon and Onesimus.

In the Colossian epistle Paul referred to Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you." Cf. Col. 4:9. He was one of them because he was a Colossian, but Paul had some other very wonderful news for them which they may, or may not, have heard before.

You see, Onesimus was a bondservant who belonged to Philemon. He had run away from Colosse, and somehow had gotten to Rome. In Rome, probably in prison, he had come into contact with the Apostle Paul, and that was the beginning of a marvelous change. Onesimus was going back, not the same man he had been when he left; he was going back a man who had been changed, TRANSFORMED, by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pick up the details as Paul has given them to us.

I. WHAT ONESIMUS HAD BEEN.

- A. "Unprofitable" (v. 11). This word means useless, and it speaks of the kind of a person who is hard to use. You could do something quicker yourself than to try to get Onesimus to do it.

He is the only person in the Bible concerning whom this word is used. There was just no one quite as hopeless as he was. Onesimus did Philemon a favor, in one sense, when he ran away, because Philemon was actually far better off without him.

- B. Irresponsible. Paul writes in v. 15, "he . . . departed!" This goes along with what we have already said.
- C. A wrong-doer (v. 18). This means that he was guilty of some criminal action. Paul mentions this in Col. 3:25 when he writes to servants. We do not know what this involved but Philemon had some real reason to prosecute Onesimus, and perhaps even to see that he was put to death.

D. Very likely a thief (v. 18).

The way Paul refers to this it seems that it must have been in addition to the wrongdoing that he refers to first. Perhaps the last thing that Onesimus had done to Philemon before running away was to steal the money that he needed to get to Rome!

What hope would you hold out for a person like this? His condition certainly was a hopeless one. How long these things had been going on, or how much Onesimus had done, we do not know. All we do know is that it was a hopeless situation.

II. WHAT HAD HAPPENED?

To put it briefly, Onesimus had been TRANSFORMED, changed, made into a new man.

- A. Now he is "profitable" (v. 11)--easy to use. Now he was looking for things to do. And when you would give him a job, you could forget about it.

Paul uses this word profitable only two other times in his epistles:

- 1) In 2 Tim. 2:21,

"If a man, therefore, purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and fit for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

- 2) 2 Tim. 4:11,

"Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is profitable to me for the ministry."

POINTS TO
HIS AMAZING
GROWTH.

The root of this word means one who is "manageable, i.e., mild, pleasant, (opp. to harsh, hard, sharp, bitter) . . . kind, benevolent." Peter uses it of the Lord in 1 Peter 2:3 where it is translated, "gracious." (The quot. above is from Thayer, p. 671.)

Onesimus had become like John Mark. But, even more, he had become like the Lord. Not only had his work changed, but he had changed.

- B. He had become a minister (v. 13).

I do not mean a preacher, but a servant who was devoted to the interests of others. Before he could only think of himself; now he was an illustration of what Paul wrote to the Philippians in Phil. 2:4, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of

others."

C. He had become "a brother beloved."

Brothers are those who have the same origin. Onesimus, though still Philemon's servant, was a brother in a two-fold sense:

- 1) They were both now the children of God.
- 2) They both had the same spiritual father here on earth because Paul had evidently led them both to the Lord. Cf. vv. 10, 19.

What the Lord had done for Philemon, He had done for Onesimus! Remember Col. 3:11 (read vv. 9-11). Onesimus is the "bond"; Philemon is the "free." In Christ they are one--saved in identically the same way!

D. He had become "a partner" with Paul, and with Philemon (v. 17).

This is the word from which we get our word, fellowship. If Philemon considered Paul his companion, his associate, his comrade, in the Gospel, then he must accept Onesimus in the same way.

None of this meant that Onesimus was no longer a servant. Nor did it mean that he had no responsibility to make right with Philemon what he could. Paul wanted to help him in this. But it did mean that Philemon could never look upon Onesimus in the same way. He was coming back a new man, changed, transformed--within and without!

III. HOW HAD IT HAPPENED?

Three things can be said here.

A. It was through the sovereignty of God.

Do you see one reason why Paul was in prison in Rome? Because he had to be there to meet Onesimus, and lead him to Christ!

How amazing are the ways of God!

B. It was through the grace of God.

Onesimus did not deserve this. He deserved nothing but judgment--from Philemon, from Rome, and from God.

Read vv. 15, 16. No man is hopeless when you take the grace of God into consideration.

C. It was through the power of God.

No prison, no program of self-reform, nothing in the whole area of human help could do for Onesimus what needed to be done. It had to be a divine work. Cf. Rom. 1:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; 1 Cor. 15:10.

Concl: Why do we have these things in Philemon (the epistle)?

There are many reasons, but these are some:

- 1) So that we will never forget what the Lord has done for us. This is seen both in Paul and in Philemon.
- 2) So that we will never underestimate what God can do in transforming the most worthless sinner into a most profitable saint.