

Message #2

Philemon 1:1-3

There is a genre of fictional writings that deal with imaginative subjects in imaginative settings that tells a series of wild stories about space travel, time travel, out of world galaxies and extraterrestrial life. The genre is called “science fiction.” Although this style of writing has been around for a few hundred years, a real turning point came back in 1966 with the debut of the series “Star Trek.” Star Trek has become a “cult phenomenon.” The fans are called “Trekkies” and they invest hours and dollars going to conventions and collecting games, figurines, novels, toys and comics. This show has so infiltrated the world that there are famous lines from the show that are still repeated today—such as “beam me up Scotty.”

Now I certainly do not want to offend any “Trekkies” we may have in the audience today, but to me this is a big waste of time and money. I cannot figure out why people would invest lifetimes devoting themselves to thinking about things that are not true.

Now one of the statements that is often made about the Bible is that it is a book of “science fiction.” In fact, I just read an article that said we need to read the Bible just like we read “science fiction.” Well, here is the problem with that; **the Bible is not written in the language of science fiction and the opening words of the books of the Bible clearly prove that point.**

As we come to the opening verses of the book of Philemon, it is obvious that this is the typical way a letter opened in the first century. I truly believe this is an important point to observe. God’s Word communicates God’s truth to real people. It uses real language and addresses real issues. The Bible is not some science fiction writing that is designed to take a person into the realm of the unknown outer space so we can think about aliens. The Bible is a real work, written to real people who lived in a real time and it is designed to make the will of God known to us.

One of the reasons I think this point is so significant is because people get all hung up on various English translations. When we were on vacation, we went to a Christian bookstore in Florida and this bookstore obviously promoted one version of the Bible. The version was good and it is trustworthy, but some of the language is archaic and there are some better ways to word things. When I went to the counter and asked for a specific translation, different from what they promoted, there was a look of panic in the store clerk’s face. This is what many people do not understand. The New Testament was actually written in the common language of the people and in the common way that letters typically were written.

PAUL BEGINS WRITING THE BOOK OF PHILEMON IN THE TYPICAL WAY REAL LETTERS WRITTEN TO REAL PEOPLE BEGAN IN THE FIRST CENTURY.

Now we may recall that last week we said we could actually call this series “The Colossian robber who became the Ephesian Pastor.” As we work our way through this little epistle, I want us to keep that point in the back of our minds. This is all part of the process that led to Onesimus being the Pastor of the church in Ephesus. There are three main introductions to Philemon:

INTRODUCTION #1 – The introduction of the author of the letter. **1:1**

There are two main personal introductions Paul makes to Philemon in regard to this letter:

Personal Introduction #1 - Paul introduces himself. **1:1a**

The opening word of the book is “Paul” (Παυλος). Obviously he is the primary writer of the letter. Now the thing that is odd here is the specific way he identifies himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (δεσμιος Χριστου Ιησου). There is no other place where Paul begins a letter by introducing himself with this description.

Now this fact that he is a prisoner is one he stresses four times in 13 verses (**v. 1, 9, 10, 13**). This is extremely rare. The reason why Paul was locked up in prison is because of his preaching of the grace Gospel (**v. 13**). **This is what always got him into trouble; he preached a non religious works faith in Jesus Christ Gospel.**

Now this grace Gospel that Paul preached is an amazing thing to think about. Paul had originally been a Pharisaical legalist who pursued and persecuted, as an O.T. law hound, those who believed on Jesus Christ. He was out to track down any who said that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and Savior of sin. He had gone on a rampage against them and what they were proclaiming.

Now, here we are some 28 years later and he is locked up in jail for proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ. **Now what this shows is in just a few years God can so transform someone that they end up in ministry for Him.** God did this with Paul and He is about to do it with Onesimus.

Now one thing that is more than just interesting about this is that **Paul is writing this letter to Philemon in order to get him to forgive Onesimus.** One would think the best way to approach that would be to pull apostolic rank on him. It would seem a good logical move for Paul to remind Philemon that he was an apostle, but that is not what he does. He informs him that he is a prisoner.

Now this point should cause Philemon to think about this fact. If Paul were actually a prisoner for taking the Gospel of grace to Gentile people, which included Philemon, then it certainly could motivate Philemon to say the least I can do is forgive Onesimus.

I have always believed that no manipulation of any kind should ever be used when presenting truth. I do not believe in emotional hype or motional manipulation.

Paul did not use his apostolic authority to manipulate Philemon in any way. He simply told him the facts—he was in jail because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Personal Introduction #2 - Paul introduces Timothy. **1:1b**

Now it is obvious that Timothy had a connection to Philemon, because Paul introduces him as “the brother” (ο αδελφος). We aren’t exactly sure what Timothy’s connection was to Philemon, but it was obviously special.

Now we do know that Timothy did spend a good amount of time with Paul in Ephesus and actually ended up teaching in Ephesus. It has been speculated that Timothy had ministered with Paul in Ephesus and Philemon had come to faith in Jesus Christ under the ministry of Paul, while in Ephesus. It is very probable that it was then when Philemon met Timothy.

We do know that Timothy had a connection to the Colossians because Paul mentions him in his letter to the Colossians (Col. 1:1). Timothy was Paul’s son in the faith and he was the one who was entrusted with passing on Pauline teaching (II Tim. 2:1-2).

By introducing Timothy to Philemon, it immediately indicates that Grace Age Christianity is a very social matter. Even a man as prominent as the Apostle Paul had people connected to him.

INTRODUCTION #2 – The introduction of the recipients of the letter. **1:1c-2**

As Paul was penning this letter, there are at least four recipients he has in mind. There are four recipients of the letter which are named:

Recipient #1 - This letter was written to Philemon. **1:1c**

Now there are two ways Paul identifies Philemon:

(Way #1) - Paul identifies Philemon as the beloved.

Paul loved this man. Philemon was a very successful businessman who had come to faith under Paul’s ministry. He was a man well-known among the churches of Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. He also was a man well-known to the church of Ephesus.

Now, we have actually visited these places and more than likely Philemon made his money in what is known today to be the Colossian Valley or Lycus river valley. It is a plush area known for its water, grass and grapes. Hierapolis was known for its hot springs and one historical writer said this Lycus valley is rich in “baths and wine.” Obviously, Philemon was a very successful businessman in this Colossian area. By the way, this may actually be the reason Paul said in Colossians, “let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink” (Col. 2:16). In fact, he told the Colossians do not submit yourself to man-made decrees that say, “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (Col. 2:20-21).

Philemon was a man who lived in this very area and Paul loved him.

(Way #2) - Paul identifies Philemon as the fellow worker.

Richard Lenski said the reason why Paul so loved Philemon is because he was devoted to the same objectives as Paul—specifically, in communicating the grace Gospel and grace doctrines to the people of that Lycus valley (*Interpretation of Philemon*, p. 954). Paul only used this term “fellow worker” in reference to hard working close friends who worked with him in promoting and supporting the ministry.

Philemon was obviously a successful and probably very wealthy individual. He was a man of means because he had at least one slave we know of, plus he owned a home that was large enough to house a church. But Philemon was a very unique businessman because he loved the Lord, he loved the Word of God and the apostolic grace teachings and he helped and supported Paul.

It is absolutely true that when one does have these objectives, one does earn a good name for himself and does lay up treasures in heaven. By Paul reminding Philemon of these realities it certainly would lend itself to him demonstrating grace to Onesimus.

Recipient #2 - This letter was written to Apphia. **1:2a**

Apphia is identified as the sister. That point tells us that Apphia was a believer in Jesus Christ. Most believe that she was Philemon’s wife. This is based on the fact that she has a very close connection with Philemon and she is closely connected to Philemon’s house.

Recipient #3 - This letter was written to Archippus. **1:2b**

Archippus is also identified as a fellow soldier and is probably the son of Philemon and Apphia. The term “fellow soldier” is a military metaphor that does show Archippus was a warrior. These military metaphors clearly teach us that our calling in this world is not to a playground but a battleground. We are in war in this world and with this world. It is clear that Archippus was a good soldier. Archippus was apparently in charge of the Colossian church (Col. 4:17).

So what we have here are all three family members—Philemon, Apphia, his wife, and Archippus, his son, who are key workers and supporters of the grace ministry in the Colossian area.

Onesimus needed to face all three of these family members in view of what he had done.

Recipient #4 - This letter was written to the church.

Not only that, but he would have to face the whole church. Now the church met in Philemon’s home. Church has always been important to God ever since the book of Acts. When the early church began, they did not have buildings like we have. So the called out saints of God would meet in someone’s home that was large enough to house the church.

It is clear that Philemon had a home large enough to house the church when it started. So Onesimus would also need to face up to what he had done in the church and Philemon, his family and the church family will be asked to take this brother back because he is a changed man.

Now there is a lot of personal data in this letter, but this letter was also to be read and taught in the church.

There are some applications we want to make:

Application #1 - God expects Grace Age apostolic instruction taught in the church.

Application #2 - God expects Grace Age apostolic instruction to be applied in the church.

Application #3 - God expects Grace Age accountability in the church. Things must be faced. Wrongs need to be made right. People right with God have no problem humbling themselves and facing others and saying they are sorry.

Application #4 - God expects Grace Age forgiveness to be demonstrated in the church. God does not want the church to hold grudges; but when there has been true repentance, He expects it to grant forgiveness.

Keep this in mind this is all part of the process of turning Onesimus into a pastor.

INTRODUCTION #3 – The introduction of the inspired greeting. **1:3**

There are two critical theological themes that are developed at the beginning. Before analyzing them, it is significant to point out that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are connected together with a coordinate conjunction “and.”

What this mean is there is coequality in the Godhead members and coequality in the impartation of these two theological realities. That little conjunction “and” proves Jesus Christ is God and He is Deity.

Theme #1 - Grace to a person is from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace is the undeserved, non-earned, non-merited gift that we receive by believing on Jesus Christ. It is the theme of Paul’s ministry—grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone.

Theme #2 - Peace to a person is from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peace is the tranquility that comes from being right with God and, ultimately, right with others.

Now only God can grant peace to a person's soul and He will only grant that peace to one who is in a right relationship with Him. The process begins by faith in Christ.

But once one comes to faith in Christ, there may still be some turmoil in one's soul because some loose ends need to be tied up. If one is willing to obey the Word of God, even when it demands we go back and tell someone we are so sorry, God will grant His peace.

That is the story of this book of Philemon. No unbeliever can have peace without Christ and no believer with Christ can have peace if not willing to obey the Word of God.

But God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son are willing to grant grace and peace to any who will do honest business in accordance to the Word of God.

This Bible is no science fiction book, this is real life. If you want real peace in your real soul, then believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and then obey the Word.