



Bible Study

Philemon

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The letter to Philemon is a pastoral letter from Paul to a friend and handles the complex issue of forgiveness. We do not have all the detail but it seems that Onesimus had abandoned Philemon, had possibly stolen from him and now finds himself alongside Paul, who was in prison. Paul leads Onesimus to Christ and realises that Onesimus needs to go back to Philemon. This letter is Paul's discussion with Philemon, which he trusts will facilitate reconciliation.

Philemon

First of all, Paul regards him as a friend and a fellow worker in God's Kingdom. Friendship in the Kingdom of God is a very precious thing. Paul does not pull rank as an apostle but he appeals to Philemon on the basis of their fellowship in Christ. Philemon is probably quite well off and he is the leader of a local church, which meets in his home. There are some good people in the church, who sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel and Paul describes Philemon as someone who refreshes the people of God.

Refreshing the Saints

'Refreshing the Saints' - this is a lovely description of when someone brings joy, comfort, stimulation and motivation to the people of God. Philemon was a joy to be with and he lifted God's people just by being with them.

Onesimus

This young man, despite being in such a loving household, had chosen to run away. It must have grieved Philemon, because other slave owners were probably cruel and uncaring. Onesimus was in such a good place and was not appreciating how fortunate he was. His name means 'useful' but, at this moment of time, he probably felt that Philemon considered him to be useless and a waste of time. Paul has disciplined this young man and is confident to commend Onesimus as a reformed character. His conversion to Christ had truly changed him. However, for him to return to Philemon would be a big step.

Reconciliation

Paul is asking a lot from Philemon but nothing beyond what the Gospel requires of us. Onesimus must be received back, not as a bad slave but as a brother in Christ. Someone to be valued, someone to be loved and someone to be respected. Paul says that Onesimus has become very dear to him and he wants Philemon to discover this new man in Christ. Onesimus is now very different. Paul is not ignoring Onesimus' sin and he offers to make up for any loss that Philemon has experienced.

Paul is painting a picture of what Christ has done for us. Christ receives us when we repent and does not hold the past against us. He has paid the debt for all of our sins, through his death on the cross. His blood has redeemed us from all of our past and has put us in a new and better place. However, Paul realises that true reconciliation is costly and he is not underestimating what he is asking Philemon to do. God the Father, in planning our salvation, was well aware of what he was asking Jesus to do, to come and be our sin-bearer but there was divine agreement, for which we are immensely grateful!

Paul is not just writing a letter but he also expresses his desire to come and stay with Philemon. Their friendship is precious and he wants to maintain it.

Points to Consider:

1. How good are we at building friendships?
2. Are we able to bring confrontation and correction with love and still maintain our friendships?
3. Could we be described as those who refresh God's people?
4. Do we inspire or deflate God's people?
5. Are there relationships where reconciliation is needed? What steps could we take to achieve this?
6. Are we truly appreciating what God has done for us in sending Jesus to be our Saviour?