

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part IV: Paul's Edifying Focus On God's Plan In Letting The Sensitive Issue Arise (Philemon 15-16)

I. Introduction

- A. Sometimes we believers face very sensitive issues in relating to relatives, coworkers or even in relating to one another in the Lord, issues that if not properly handled can create unwanted and severe interpersonal conflicts.
- B. Paul's letter to Philemon dealt with the potentially explosive issue of what to do with a runaway slave who had accepted Christ as his Savior, especially when such slaves were often killed in punishment for having run away. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1727, "Introduction to the Letter of Paul to Philemon")
- C. Exemplifying for us how to handle such an issue, Paul in Philemon 15-16 focused on God's plan in even letting the sensitive issue arise, an edifying view that we do well to imitate in similar cases of sensitive issues:

II. Paul's Edifying Focus On God's Plan In Letting The Sensitive Issue Arise, Philemon 15-16.

- A. The way the Apostle Paul laid out the epistle of Philemon puts a great emphasis on verses 15-16 (as follows):
 1. The entire epistle of Philemon is arranged in a chiasmus, an introverted correspondence where the first theme corresponds to the last, the second to the second-to-the-last, the third to the third-to-the-last, etc. (E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 1968, p. 374, 379.
 2. This arrangement "is by far the most stately and dignified presentation of a subject," and it is "always used in the most solemn and important portions of Scripture," Ibid., p. 374.
 3. The chiasmus is arranged so that verses 15-16 of the epistle are at the center of the chiasmus, Ibid., p. 379:
 - a. The introductory epistolary (v. 1-3) corresponds to the closing epistolary (v. 23-25), Ibid.
 - b. Paul's prayers for Philemon and discussion of Philemon's hospitality (v. 4-7) corresponds to Paul's comment on Philemon's hospitality and Philemon's prayers for Paul (v. 22), Ibid.
 - c. Paul's authority in v. 8 corresponds to his mention of that authority in v. 21, Ibid.
 - d. Paul's supplication in Onesimus' behalf in v. 9-10 corresponds to his repeat supplication in v. 20, Ibid.
 - e. The theme of Onesimus being a convert of Paul's (v. 10) corresponds to Paul's mention of Philemon also being a convert of Paul (v. 19b), Ibid.
 - f. Onesimus' wrongs and Paul's amends for those wrongs in v. 11-12 correspond to Onesimus' wrong and Paul's amends in v. 18-19a, Ibid.
 - g. Paul's mention of Philemon's receiving Onesimus being equated with his receiving Paul in v. 12 corresponds to Paul's reference to Philemon's receiving Onesimus as equal to receiving Paul in v. 17, Ibid.
 - h. The reference to Paul and Philemon in v. 13-14 corresponds to the reference to both men in v. 16, Ibid.
 - i. Yet, at the center of this grand chiasmus of which the whole epistle is formed, Paul refers to Onesimus in verse 15 and again to him in verse 16, making his comments in those verses extremely important, Ibid.
- B. Those comments comprised Paul's focus on the master plan of God in letting the sensitive issue of Onesimus' running away from Philemon even occur for the far greater eventual and eternal good involved (as follows):
 1. The adverb *tacha* that translates "perhaps, possibly, probably" (Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 814) introduces Philemon 15 (U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 745) and suggests "a deeper purpose of God's providence in Onesimus' running away," Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Phm. 15.
 2. Paul reasoned that God may have let Onesimus run away from Philemon and make his way to Rome to try to hide among its throngs of people only to encounter the Apostle Paul that Paul might lead him to faith in Christ as Savior and be saved from his sin and escape eternal damnation, Philemon 15 with Philemon 10.
 3. Accordingly, the sin of slave Onesimus' running away, as bad a sin as it was in that era, served the far greater eternal good of leading to the eternal salvation of Onesimus' soul, and to the added benefits of his being restored to his master no longer a mere slave, but now as a beloved brother in Christ, Phm. 10, 16a.
 4. Indeed, Onesimus' running away led to his becoming a beloved brother to Philemon and Paul where had he not run away, he might not have been saved and thus not be so beloved by either man, Philemon 16b.

Lesson: *Though Onesimus' flight from his master Philemon produced a sensitive issue in the life of Philemon and the whole church in his house, Paul focused on the fact that God may have let that evil event occur to serve the far greater good of leading to Onesimus' salvation where he also became a beloved brother to Paul and to Philemon.*

Application: *If we face a sensitive issue, know that God's master plan has let it occur to serve a far greater good in the eternal perspective, and may we look for that good for encouragement to respond well to the sensitive issue.*