

PAUL who met a prodigal son- PHILEMON

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(EPISTLE TO PHILEMON)

What a pity it is that there is no telephone exchange in heaven! Of course, there is a private line to the palace of the King, and all praying people use it. But what a shame the service is not extended! If only we could lift a receiver, dial a number, and ask the angelic operator to put us through to Paul the apostle. If only this were possible, the industries of the world would be still while all men listened. The people in palaces and hovels would desire to hear the message, and during that conversation all other voices would be hushed. Wishful thinking! Certainly, and perhaps a little absurd ; but it does no harm. It merely represents the fact that if it were possible, Paul would be able to supply the answers to many of our questions. For example, we could ask him about his convert Onesimus.

Grace Redeeming

The Acts of the Apostles closes with the words: "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him." Probably this was the first Christian pastorate in Rome ; and Paul's Church was established in a simple home. Were all the meetings held in the house, or was Paul permitted to walk to the market place? Did he ever minister in the synagogue, and where did he find Onesimus-or did Onesimus find him? Had the fugitive become destitute in a strange city, and did desperation drive him to Paul? Had he become contrite, and did he miserably seek advice from the only man he knew in the city? Was Onesimus surprised when he recognized the preacher? Oh, Paul, why can't we get you on the 'phone? Surely, you were thrilled to lead that man to Christ.

Grace Repaying

Paul wrote, " I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds. Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable both to thee and to me. . . . Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel." It is therefore clear that grace had completely transformed Onesimus. He had no wish to escape from Paul ; and in contrast to Demas and others, this new convert loved to serve the man who had won him for Christ. Grace had been shed abroad in his heart. His presence cheered Paul, and his eagerness both to learn and to help demonstrated the reality of his conversion. The transparent sincerity of this babe in Christ, and the whole-hearted service which he rendered, might well serve as an example for all saints.

Grace Restoring

Paul was a little sad, and Onesimus had downcast eyes. The apostle was speaking: "Son, I must send you home, and I don't want to do it. I could wish that you were here for ever. But Philemon is your master, and the fact that God has forgiven your sin does not free you from the obligation to make restitution for the wrongs of the past. Moral requirements demand that you return to the man to whom you are indebted. My boy, you must go home." And Onesimus agreed. Amazing changes had taken place since he had absconded from his master. Punishment might be waiting for him, but

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he found comfort in the fact that he was about to do his
duty. He had written a letter at Paul's dictation, and that
letter-the epistle to Philemon-was a document destined to
become famous throughout the world.

Grace Replying

Philemon's eyes were misty ; the letter from his old friend
had stirred memory. Again and again he read, "I beseech
thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my
bonds. . . . He departed from thee for a season, that thou
shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but
above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but now
much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord."
The words " both in the flesh " suggest that Onesimus might
have been a brother of Philemon-a prodigal brother who
had stolen money. One does not need great imagination to
see a cosy parlour where a log fire burns on the hearth. The
elder brother listens to this story of a conversion in Rome.
Former wrongs were all forgotten ; bitterness of spirit was
completely unknown, and love reigned amid boundless rejoic-
ing. Yes, this is a story of grace-wonderful grace overflowing
in four hearts.

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