



PT Butler

Bible Study Notebooks

Study of PHILEMON

prepared by P. T. Butler Th.D

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These Bible study notes are provided for your use in the preparation of teaching the holy scriptures. They were meticulously prepared over many years to serve the Kingdom of God and aid in the growth of Christians of any age. Please use them in combination with prayer and diligence to promote the clear and honest declaration of God's word.

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Teacher's Notes

prepared by Paul T. Butler

PHILEMON

The New Testament does not set forth any commandments about either non-violent or violent rebellion against physical enslavement. Physical slavery does continue in our world today--in both hemispheres! So what is the Christian to do about slavery? First, the Christian should view all human beings through the mind of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-16). All human beings are brothers due to a common ancestry in Adam and Eve (or the sons of Noah). Any compassionate person should want exactly the same for a "brother" as he would want for himself (Matt. 7:12). It is only reasonable to conclude from the Bible that God created all human beings to be at liberty among one another---so far as that individual liberty does not create anarchy and evil for others. Second, the Christian must take a stand for God-mandated (Biblically revealed) human justice (equality). Each Christian must personally decide whether this "stand" shall be verbal, political, financial, physical-intervention (joining in a "fight" against it), or intercessory (prayer). The Christian must obey and defend social order (i.e., civil government) (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17, etc.). Paul and Peter both wrote these apostolic commandments during the apex of the ancient Roman institution of slavery. Anyone who decides his/her actions must be "obeying God rather than men" (Acts 5:30) must be prepared to suffer the reactions of the civil government under which they are living! It may be that a point is reached where every Christian must reject its nation's laws or customs in order to carry out in his life the commandments of God---if so, he must be prepared to suffer the consequences! But he had better be certain beyond any reasonable doubt that he is doing God's will by disobeying civil government! Third, and this is probably the most instructive word from God we have on the subject, Paul wrote to the people of his day, "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called (became a Christian). Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom (legally), avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of the Lord. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God." (1Cor. 7:20-24). Remember when Paul wrote this. Thousands of slaves were turning to Christ. Slaves were the most numerous of the various social castes of the day to become Christians. Far from advocating immediate, violent, armed, physical overthrow of the institution of slavery, Paul advocated that slaves who became Christians should obtain their freedom, if the opportunity came to them (legally), otherwise to remain as they were. One is always moved to visualize Lew Wallace's Ben Hur here. Violent, riotous, nihilistic overthrow of civil order, as unjust as slavery is, cannot be sanctioned for a Christian. Satan is the author of civil disorder, anarchy, riot, and war as alleged "means to an end." God is the author of order, not confusion (1 Cor. 14:33,40). Satan "scatters" (Matt. 12:30). It is extremely unwise and ungodly to create civil anarchy as a means by which to attain social justice!

History teaches that an attempt to bring about instantaneous and complete

cessation of slavery through violent rebellion would not have been a service to society in Paul's day. There was, an hundred years prior to Paul, a violent uprising against Roman slavery, led by Spartacus, the Thracian gladiator in 73-71 B.C. It accomplished nothing except misery, bloodshed and increase of harshness in treatment of slaves. Of course we have the advantage of retrospect with our own American Civil War. Any amateur student of the history of that conflict knows that while slavery certainly was a major issue, it was not the major issue. THE MAJOR ISSUE WAS: WHETHER A PEOPLE COULD EXIST AS ONE NATION--HALF SLAVE AND HALF FREE. In other words, the major issue was UNION, economically, socially, civilly and constitutionally. It became a grass-roots political struggle over "state's rights, versus federal power to preserve the union." It became apparent to the southern economic and political powers of that era that their "way of life" could not stand in the face of industrialization and mechanization. Their whole economy, civil structure, and social circumstance would disappear should Congress be able to constitutionally deconstruct their system of human slavery. Therefore, southern forces chose to secede from the Union! Now the question for President Lincoln and the remaining Congress was whether TWO NATIONS could exist, socially, civilly and constitutionally, economically and geographically out of ONE PEOPLE! It was already apparent, from the border war going in Missouri and Kansas, that it would be an impossibility. The shots fired at Ft. Sumter, were not the first shots fired in our Civil War. It resulted in the "grapes of wrath" of nearly 700,000 American lives lost, a social upheaval continuing to this day, an environmental destruction continuing to be reaped to this day, and yet the problem remains as an ongoing enigma in the minds of many to this very day. WHERE WOULD YOU HAVE STOOD ON THE ISSUE HAD YOU LIVED IN 1776-1865? The very man who wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights---life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" OWNED SLAVES! George Washington and Sam Adams owned slaves; "practically every one of our founding fathers" who were southern plantation owners, owned slaves. Alexander Campbell owned slaves! Once you have become a thorough student of the history you will be appalled at the carnage America's War of The Rebellion (i.e., the Civil War) wrought upon this nation--and the consequences from which she still suffers. Could slaves be freed by the gospel without war? In other words, would the gospel work--or must man take the problem into his own hands? The Gospel would work if everyone believed and obeyed the gospel! Christianity was born into a world of slavery on scale such as the world has never seen since. Every nation considered it proper to enslave those conquered! Early Christianity changed that concept and practice to a large extent. But since all of civilization is not Christian, then slavery often has to be endured or changed by force "with the cure" (result--war, civil anarchy) often being almost as evil as the disease (slavery). Look at the cost to Europe (and the rest of the world) for human liberty from Nazism. Look at the cost to the Russian people for their freedom from political and economic enslavement. The only way to keep from continually paying such tremendous costs is to see that the Gospel of Christ goes everywhere it finds an "open door."

God desires social justice in the world! Read the O. T. Law! Did you know (acc. to National Geographic magazine, Sep. 2003), there are currently 27 million of the world's people in slavery! Christians are to do good works unto all men (Rom. 12:14-21; 13:1-10;

Gal. 6:10; Heb. 13:1-5; 1 Jn. 3:17; James 4:17, etc.). If Christians do not stand up for right, then selfish, grasping, heartless, impenitent evil-doers will wipe their feet in the face of truth and justice and make life unbearable on this earth! However, is civil and social reform the main work of the church? Do we bring to people the kingdom of God by social legislation (either national or international)? One wit put it this way: The O.T. prophets, John the Baptist, Christ and his apostles, all spoke against social injustice and verbally demanded social righteousness! BUT THEY ALL ATTEMPTED SOCIAL REGENERATION BY USING PERSUASION TO PRODUCE INDIVIDUAL REPENTANCE (CHANGE OF MIND TO GOD'S WAY OF THINKING). Even the grasshopper-eating-fire-belching, VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS, waited until people were convinced enough that he was right to say, "Teacher, what shall we do?" Then he said to them, in no uncertain terms, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food let him do likewise....collect no more than is appointed you....rob no one by violence or by false accusation and be content with your wages." (Lk. 3:10-14). Jesus's unsolicited mental stab into the consciousness of Nicodemus, ruler and teacher of Israel, was, "You must be born anew." The main thrust of the first century church (and it existed in a social order much more depraved than ours) was converting individuals to the Gospel of Christ---one by one---through persuasion of the historicity and credibility of their message and their own personal conviction of its truth lived out in their daily lives! We can never go wrong following the examples of the Bible's Christians. Occasionally riots and physical violence occurred when the prophets or Jesus and his apostles proclaimed the truth, but neither the prophets nor Jesus and his apostles ever used violence as a method; their method was always reasoning from the Scriptures! A clear example is Paul's method with Philemon in the case of the runaway slave Onesimus! Paul did not threaten personal violence or the use of civil action, he simply used the pen and the page to persuade Philemon of his moral obligation before God! Does the Bible hold forth any hope that humanitarian goodness will ever do away with all social evil by using economic, diplomatic, civil, or scientific advancements? The answer is a resounding "NEVER HAPPEN!" (See Rom. 1:28-32; Matt 13:30,40; Lk. 18:8; Jn. 12:8; Rev. 20:8; Matt. 24:37). Civil governments and social mores are only stop-gap measures to hold total evil in check, by force, while the Gospel is being preached (1 Tim. 2:1-4). God's society---i.e., the church, the kingdom of God consists of citizens willingly persuaded to love, honor and obey its KING. There is not one iota of force involved in its constitution! "If you love me you will keep my commandments.....etc." These present world orders (civil and social) are doomed to destruction along with this physical order (2 Pet. 3:10; 1 Cor. 15:24-28). When they and time shall have fulfilled their purpose in God's great scheme of redemption, they shall cease, and all that remains will be God's kingdom of regeneration, reconciliation and peace. Until that time Christians have their mandate from heaven to obey civil authorities (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17) all the while preaching the gospel with persuasiveness, conviction, winsomeness, and power, even if they must suffer socially and ecologically (Rom. 8:18ff) and "snatch some from the fire" by evangelism (Jude 17-23). THAT'S WHAT GOD SAYS---IT ISN'T UNCONCERN---IT'S REALITY! There is Biblical precedent for believers serving as public servants in a centralized form of human government which gives itself to be used as God's instrument for the "public welfare" (e.g., Joseph & the starving Egyptians; Solomon's works, etc., see What The Bible Says About Civil Government, by Paul T. Butler, 1990, College Press, pp. 339-351).

This little epistle contains in it one of the clearest illustrations of forgiveness in all the NT. There are three bases appealed to for motivating forgiveness: (a) human brotherhood, v. 16 we are all brothers-in-the-flesh we can't escape it, God created us all from two parents; we all have the same gene-pool; (b) redemption, v. 11,18,19, Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of Onesimus's usefulness as one who had run away but had been prevented from further lostness and Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of Paul's willingness to make atonement (i.e., restitution) for any and all trouble Onesimus might have caused; (c) Christian brotherhood, v. 10,16--in the Lord we are willing brothers, i.e., we have chosen to become united as brethren in the adopted family of God--we are to welcome one another...as Christ has welcomed (us) Rom. 15:7, openly, freely, lovingly, and faithfully. Point (b) is most crucial. Forgiveness cannot occur unless someone bears the burden of the offence. The offender cannot be obligated to bear the burden of his offence--that would not be "forgiveness"--it would be retaliation or reparation. Actually, there is only one way the offender can be forgiven and that is for the offended to bear the burden of the offence! A third-party-substitute concept of atonement doesn't quite fulfill the qualifications for the essence of the idea of forgiveness. **THE ONE OFFENDED MUST BEAR THE BURDEN OF THE OFFENCE IN ORDER TO FORGIVE THE OFFENDER!** That is how God forgives us. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." (2 Cor. 5:18-21). And the most intriguing text of all is Hebrews 6:17. "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath." (RSV). The Greek phrase is, *autou emesiteusen horko*. The Greek verb *emesiteusen* (interposed) is aorist indicative, active, middle. The "middle" voice is unique to the Greek language and expresses the idea that "the subject is represented as acting upon himself (itself) or in some way that concerns himself." In other words, as the Thompson Chain Reference Bible (KJV) states, Hebrews 6:17 should be more literally translated, "...he interposed himself by an oath..." This is what Job prayed for when he said, "Be a surety for me with Thyself." (Job 17:3--see also Isa. 38:14; Psa. 119:122). "God, in this swearing by Himself, descends, as it were, from His own absolute exaltation, in order, so to speak, to look up to Himself after the manner of men, and take Himself to witness, and so by a gracious condescension confirm the promise for the sake of its inheritors."---Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle To The Hebrews*, Vol. I, 1952, Eerdmans, pp. 314-315. God mediated, or came in between men and Himself, through the oath of himself! How does God give a "more convincing" oath than the one he gave Abram? He could become man and interpose himself (to forgive--AND HE DID! All the fulness of the Godhead could dwell in a human body (Jn. 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:19; 2:9; Heb. 2:10-18; 10:5-10, et al) and partake of human nature and mediate (forgive) between his divine nature and his human nature---AND HE DID! Every promise of God's word (especially forgiveness) has confirmation in the incarnation, the vicarious death, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ...is always Amen (Yes). For all the promises of God find their Amen (Yes) in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God." (2 Cor. 1:19-20). Put quite succinctly, God forgave us by bearing the burden of our offences in his own person---if we are to forgive as we have been forgiven, we must bear the burden of the offences of those who offend us in our own person. We must do it personally, totally, freely---just as God has forgiven us. We can't do it partly, grudgingly, impersonally, or coercively. When someone commits a crime against us, the civil government may (and should) step forward and seek justice---and all Christians must uphold this principle for the

sake of civil order---but on a personal basis the Christian has to forgive the criminal by bearing the burden of the crime committed against him. One more significant aspect of forgiveness is that of the *Again@* the one doing the forgiving gets from it. Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." (Matt. 18:15). The Greek verb *ekerdesas*, is translated gain and is from the Greek world of finance where it was often used to mean,---make a profit, accumulate, obtain, gain by avoiding a loss, etc. When we forgive a brother, he not only remains a brother, but we have gained a treasure we might have lost had we not forgiven!

Paul could have been severe in his rebuke of Philemon. He could have put all the blame on Philemon for Onesimus's decision to run away. Paul could have questioned Philemon's Christian faith since Onesimus apparently did not become a "Christian brother" until converted by Paul. Paul could have huffed and puffed that Philemon should not even "own" slaves since he, himself, is a Christian. Paul could have extended his letter into a long dissertation on the theological obligations of the atonement and the moral commitments of Christian discipleship. **BUT PAUL DID NONE OF THESE THINGS!**

There are 17 distinct APPEALS (not harsh orders) by Paul to Philemon. These 17 could well be called a short course in "Christian diplomacy" for Paul's appeals are the very essence of tact. A harsh, legalistic approach to people, especially brethren, is neither helpful nor Scriptural:

I am a prisoner, v. 1,9

There is a love between us, v. 1

I am thankful for you, v. 4,7

I pray for you, v. 4

You have refreshed the hearts of saints, v. 7

I don't command you; I rather appeal, v. 8-9

I am an old man, v. 9

I have won Onesimus to Christ, v. 10

He is now profitable to us both v. 11

Sending him back is like sending my own heart, v. 12

You may now have him forever, v. 15

He is now your brother, v. 16

Receive him as you would receive me, v. 17

I will pay whatever he owes you v. 18-19

Don't forget that you owe yourself to me, v. 19

I have great confidence in you, v. 21

I'm eagerly hoping to come visit you, v. 22

There are numerous examples of courtesy and tact, both given and withheld, in the NT. One thinks of Jesus's tact and courtesy toward the woman at the well in John 4; of the tactlessness of the Pharisee toward Jesus in Luke 7:36-50 and the courtesy showed Jesus by the sinful woman; of the lessons on courtesy and hospitality taught by Jesus (i.e., Lk. 14:1-35); of the courtesy shown Jesus by Mary using her precious ointment on his feet (John 12) and the tactlessness of Judas and the other disciples toward Mary. Paul teaches us that we should "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10); that "so far as it depends on us, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18); we should "do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than ourselves" (Phil. 2:3); that we should "let our speech be always gracious, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how we ought to answer every one" (Col. 4:6). CAN YOU THINK OF OTHER EXAMPLES? BIBLICAL? PERSONAL EXPERIENCES? There is no doubt that the everyday, constant, practice of Christian courtesy and tact would have great healing power within the church and tremendous attracting power without (outside) the church. Why do we "always hurt the one we love, the one we shouldn't hurt at all?" (the lyrics to an old Mills Brothers recording).

The fact that Paul would not keep Onesimus without Philemon's consent shows the high value which Paul set on individual human rights (property rights), especially the right to make one's own choices. Paul recognized Philemon's right, in the will of God, to dictate what should be done with his slave ("property") Onesimus. As Christians, we have come so far in our revulsion against slavery that Paul's attention to Philemon's legal rights as "master" seem to us more a violation of Onesimus's greater right to be free than a necessary preservation of Philemon's rights. However, circumstances being what they were then (and have been in numerous other eras and places), Philemon's rights were a priority. But the real issue is this: Paul expected Philemon to do the right thing by this "returned" slave! And on what basis? By compulsion of an apostolic command, or by Philemon's choice? What if Paul knew Philemon would not do the right thing? Should Paul have still sent the slave back? Of course! Paul's obligation was to keep the law of the land, respect the legal rights of the property owner, and send the slave back. It was not Paul's obligation to force Philemon to do the right thing! The right thing which is often beyond the legal limit of the law can only be elicited through appeal to the higher law called love. Paul sought to effect social changes in people's individual lives by appealing to the sanctified free will of people rather than by force. Will this work? There are plenty of Biblical examples of love's work-ability! Paul thought it worked for he wrote, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one had died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view..." (2 Cor. 5:14-16). We should expect people to act through free choice in good ways when we use the proper powers to elicit such actions. Those powers are resident in the truthfulness and captivating graciousness of God's word taught by a Christian, with patient endurance, with sensitivity and courtesy and respect for freedom of choice. But, what if people do not act for the good when given freedom of choice? There is only one alternative to freedom of choice---that is coercion by force of law (1 Tim. 1:8-9). The constitutional basis of the kingdom of God is LOVE not COERCION, FORCE, OR LAW!

Paul evangelized Onesimus even though Paul was a prisoner of the Roman empire himself. Can you cite examples of others doing evangelism in spite of difficult circumstances? The world is constantly full of such examples---in every decade, in every year! Read John Noble's book, *I Found God In Soviet Russia*, the story of his 12 years in Communist prison camps; or *By Their Blood, Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*, by James & Marti Hefley, or *He Leadeth Me, Forty Years in Asia*, by Isabel Maxey Dittmore, or, *The Dogs May Bark, But the Caravan Moves On*, by Gertrude Morse. Paul evangelized a slave who had run away from his master and apparently robbed the master or some way defrauded him. Should we expose ourselves to outlaws and runaways and expect them to become Christians? Are we to build the kingdom of God from slaves and robbers? The Israelites were slaves in Egypt! Jesus took a penitent thief to Paradise! The Corinthian Christian church was partly composed of former immoral persons, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greed, drunkards, revilers and robbers (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Perhaps the greatest lesson from the book of Philemon is that runaway, thieving slaves can be changed into penitent, humble Christians who are willing to go right back into the former limitations and struggles of life and live it to the glory of God and Christ!

Introduction to Paul T. Butler Th.D

Paul was born in Springfield Missouri and graduated from Conway High School prior to enlistment in the US Navy. He began serious bible study with correspondence courses from San Jose Bible College. He later enrolled in Ozark Bible College and acquired his Bachelor of Theology degree June of 1961. He received a Master of Biblical Literature degree from Ozark in May of 1973. He received a Doctorate of Theology from The Theological University of America in October of 1990.

Paul taught at Ozark Christian College from 1960 to 1997. He also served many years as registrar for the college.

Introduction to the Sound Bible Study project.

The Sound Bible Study project is a cooperative effort of Christian educators and Jordan Media Enterprises LLC to provide the serious examination of the Scriptures for the conscientious student. All the teachers are experienced educators who have spent countless hours in the classroom on both sides of the lectern. The audio recordings and written notes are made available for those who wish to learn God's Word at a collegiate level but have been unable to matriculate. There is no intention to compete with the many faithful Bible schools, but rather to serve along side and strengthen both the student and the teacher for a stronger and more effective Kingdom of God that knows how to properly divide the Word of God.

