

## TRANSITION FROM THE WORLD OF THINGS TO THE WORLD AS SYMBOLS

From the Book of Philemon

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### PART 1: THE ROOT OF SYMBOLISM v.1-3.

#1. Biblical faith is demanding. The Word of God requires that a believer stop perceiving the world as only *the experience of things*. Faith is the *enhanced perception of the world in revealed terms*. This is called biblical symbolism.

#2. Roman authority had imprisoned the apostle as a political prisoner. Through revealed symbols, he saw beyond the crude, distressing experience of the situation. He was "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" v.1. These words were not at Paul's personal discretion to simply overlay on his circumstance at will. This was the Lord's pronouncement.

#3. Sufficient understanding of our circumstances, therefore, cannot be derived uniquely from the experience of them. This is a *spiritual law*. Revealed symbolism tells the believer that there is more to circumstance than meets the eye.

#4. Spiritual relations with other believers was enhanced beyond physical blood origins. Paul wrote of "brothers" and "sisters" in the enhanced language of revealed meanings v.1, 2. He referred to "our fellow soldier" v.2. These revealed terms or symbols put advanced meaning on everything in our range of experience.

#5. This then is an exercise of pure faith. Incumbent upon every believer is the *re-marking* of all experience by revealed symbols. This is done for one irreducible reason; it is the point of view of the Almighty.

#6. The Book of Philemon is an appeal to a good man and a man of conviction about an even greater engagement with the Word of God. Philemon lived in a world of undeniable facts. We live in the world of facts. But, the Lord teaches us that the facts we face must be *subsumed by biblical symbolism*.

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### PART 2: THE MOTIVATING STRENGTH OF BIBLICAL SYMBOLISM v.4-9.

#1. Obedience to the laws of God is a fundamental. However, this text observes another factor in executing the will of God: the motivating power of revealed symbolism or meaning.

#2. "Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you" v.8, 9. Minimalistic obedience is not the full measure of devotion to the Word of God. The full measure is achieved when the mind, heart and soul are fully engaged with the Word of God. Reasoning is moved away from attachment only to facts and basic conformity to rules and is then fueled by a greater understanding of revealed meaning from above.

#3. In other words, *thinking becomes a shared conditionality with God*. Philemon's way of symbolic reasoning was the key to what he had contributed to the solidarity of "the church in your house" v.2.

#4. Because of how his mind worked, this man's range of effect was greatly extended. "For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother" v.7.

#5. Philemon did not just react to facts; he was not content with minimalism in faith. Rather this believer pursued the absolute meaning, the revealed symbolism of the Word of God. That is what an apostle calls doing "what is proper".

#6. The move from mere facts to revealed symbolism is also the transition from minimalism in faith to spiritual maturity.

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PART 3: THE ABSOLUTE PLANE OF MEANING and BEHAVIOR.

#1. Onesimus was a slave, in the legal and political sense, belonging to Philemon. He, apparently, left the employ without permission. There could be consequences for that.

#2. Paul suggested that PROVIDENCE could have been the mainspring in the situation v.15. The Almighty was involved.

#3. Onesimus, it seems, was not just seeking his freedom, but something else. Whatever the motive, Onesimus found spiritual wisdom and therefore a new, different and revealed way of symbolism v.10, 11.

#4. At that point then the Apostle, Onesimus and Philemon were all on the exact same eternal, absolute plane of meaning and behavior. Onesimus was sent back (v.12) "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" v.16.

#5. In essence, the political slave-master relation had been superseded by revealed symbolic meaning. Lesson: *Worldly terms are transcended by revealed symbolism. And therefore the*

*rules of reasoning have been changed.* Proof: "but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will" v.14.

Voluntary! It was all voluntary founded upon the shift of all parties to revealed symbolism. Today, in the social world of men, every believer is to represent this transition.

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PART 4: PERSONAL RELATIONS AS SYMBOLS v.17-20.

#1. "If then you regard me as a partner, accept him as you would me v.17. Onesimus was a slave and he had challenged the goodwill of his master. Paul asked Philemon to perform an act of selflessness.

#2. This was the willful act of reacting to Onesimus as a symbol and not as an historical actor. *Philemon was to relate to Onesimus as a symbol and not as he was.* Very demanding.

#3. Consider the most immediate effects of relating to one as a symbol instead of as a personality. Psychology and sociology will have to be retooled. How does one relate to an apostle?

#4. Would one charge an apostle? "But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account" v.18.

#5. Among believers, symbolization outranks personality. This is how we hold things together, in spite of our sins and differences. The apostle was asking Philemon to treat himself as a symbol. "...I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)" v.19. Philemon was in fact wronged by Onesimus. Yet Paul reminded Philemon that he was the symbol of a debtor himself.

#6. *With this the footing of relationships is changed, improved, enhanced.* Symbolizing is how relationships are benefitted (v.20) "in the Lord" and how they can refresh us "in Christ". The secret is out.

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PART 5: A MORE PERFECTED OBEDIENCE v.21-25.

#1. Paul addresses Philemon: "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say" v.21. Question: What was the foundation for the

apostle's high expectation of Philemon's behavior in that circumstance? There is only one viable answer: And that was Philemon's predicted form of reasoning in the situation.

#2. Philemon's form of thinking was not relative to things, facts, situation nor circumstance. Rationalism brings human rational capacity to bear on the world of things with a corresponding behavior. This is considered normal and reasonable.

#3. However, Philemon's reasoning was quite relative to revealed symbolism. The revealed language of the word of God came to bear on his capacity for thought. *There was an inherent outcome to that form of reasoning. That outcome was a more perfected obedience, expressed by the text, "you will do even more than what I say".*

#4. Philemon became, therefore, a more perfected believer.

#5. Neither Paul nor Philemon were satisfied with *a low case, minimal obedience to the Lord*. In like manner, the believer today should and can pursue a more perfected usefulness in the kingdom of the spirit. The apostolic sentiment: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" v.25.