



Philemon's Problem: A Theology of Grace

Mr. James Tunstead Burtchaell

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Philemon was a wealthy Christian whose slave Onesimus went off in search of freedom, met and listened to Paul, and joined the church. But instead of being given a new life of his own, Onesimus was sent back by Paul to an aggrieved master with no protection but his mentor's brief Letter to Philemon. Paul never asked Philemon to free his slave. Instead, he admonished him to take Onesimus back - only now as his brother in Christ. This left both master and bondsman with a problem: how could one man own another and both be brothers in Christ? In this unique work James Tunstead Burtchaell uses the ancient story of Philemon and Onesimus as a compelling entry into modern theological reflection on the unbelievable reach of the grace and forgiveness of the Father whose Son died without disciples, rose to reconcile and transform them, and then scattered them around the world as men and women who were now also able to love those who loved them not - and transform them too. According to Burtchaell, in order for the faith of Philemon and Onesimus to cope with Paul's imperative, they required an inspired imagination to take in the notion that the Father loves sinners (i.e., all of us), and he neither would nor could do otherwise. For Philemon and Onesimus to undertake such a relentless love themselves would require frighteningly new convictions, new commitments, and new celebrations.

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