

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Philemon

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Introducing Philemon

The book of Philemon carries all the marks of a personal note, addressed to a friend and his circle whom Paul speaks of in terms of endearment and affection. Its theme is the release of a slave from punishment and a recommendation that he not only should be treated with forgiveness but should be given a welcome into the Christian family as a cherished family member. Paul's advocacy of the slave's case was genuinely revolutionary and marks the opening of a new chapter in social relationships. The letter speaks about how the members of Christ's church are to relate to one another and treat one another. Hence the letter has this timeless significance.

The Occasion and Purpose of the Letter

This is the shortest of the letters that go to make up the Pauline corpus, consisting of 335 words in the original Greek. It is the only example in the extant Pauline correspondence of what may be termed a personal note.

A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner Philemon, who was a Christian living at Colossae, and had run off. The nature of the slave's offense is not certain. It is usually assumed that he had stolen money and then absconded (v. 18).

Paul's plea was a revolutionary thought in contrast with the contemporary treatment of runaway slaves whom the master could take steps to arrest and then brutally punish. Running through Paul's appeal is the current of Christian compassion (v. 12) and the powerful reminder that Philemon is already in debt to Paul himself (v. 19b) as owing to Paul's preaching of the gospel his very salvation under God. The request ends with a parting shot (v. 21) that Philemon will go beyond the limit of Paul's desire; this appeal is reinforced by the prospect of the apostle's visit (v. 22), a hope that would spur Philemon to a ready acceptance of what was asked of him.

The Place of Origin and Date

Paul writes as a prisoner (vv. 1, 9, 10, 23), and a careful comparison will show that this letter was sent from the same place as the Colossian epistle. Onesimus is to accompany Tychicus, who was entrusted with the Colossian letter (Colossians 4:9). Paul's situation as a prisoner may well have drawn Onesimus into his

company; some scholars believe that Onesimus had been caught and placed in the same cell as the Christian missionary and so won for Christ.

The Historical and Pastoral Significance of the Letter

The question is sometimes raised that the New Testament never condemns slavery explicitly and so it is defective at a crucial point. Yet part of the answer to this implied criticism is that Paul does not advocate a social philosophy that results in revolution and violence. Paul's whole approach to Philemon is voluntaristic, leaving Philemon to settle the matter by appealing to his conscience.

Summary

Each of the parties involved was called upon to do something difficult: on Paul's part, to deprive himself of Onesimus's service and company; for Onesimus, to return to his master-owner, whom he had wronged; for Philemon, to forgive.

The Place of Philemon in the New Testament

It is unlikely that the letter would have been preserved if it had not been received in the spirit in which it was sent. We are on safe ground in postulating a happy ending to the story. The reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus becomes an acted parable of the gospel itself, which breaks into the world of sin, suspicion and anger, of pride and fear, with the good news that Jesus Christ has revealed God's purposes of salvation, of human wholeness, of loving and forgiving fellowship.

No part of the New Testament more clearly demonstrates integrated Christian thinking and living. It offers a blend, utterly characteristic of Paul, of love, wisdom, humor, gentleness, tact, and, above all, Christian and human maturity.

Opening Greetings (Philemon 1-3)

The names of his associates (vv. 23-24) also indicate an imprisonment identical with the one from which he wrote to the Colossians (Colossians 4:3, 18). The addressees are Philemon and Apphia, who is often taken to be Philemon's wife, along with Archippus (known from Colossians 4:17). But there is a wider audience as well, as "the church in [Philemon's] house" is included. The letter, ostensibly a private note to this family and to Philemon in particular, is intended to be read out in public worship.

v. 1 "Timothy our brother" is with Paul. It is never said that he too is a prisoner. Despite this formal mention of Timothy, the letter as a whole is clearly a very personal one from Paul himself, not a joint effort. It is addressed primarily to "Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker." These epithets imply that he,

unlike most of the Colossian church (Colossians 2:1), has known Paul personally and has collaborated with him in the work of the gospel. Philemon had himself been converted through the ministry of Paul (v. 19), probably during a visit to Ephesus, though some have speculated that the two met while Paul was on his journey “through the interior” from the region of Galatia and Phrygia to Ephesus (Acts 18:23; 19:1).

v. 2 If Onesimus is to be welcomed back, it must be by the entire household. Paul therefore writes also to “Apphia our sister,” who is almost universally reckoned to be Philemon’s wife, and herself a Christian (“sister”) to “Archippus our fellow-soldier,” who, cryptically addressed in Colossians 4:17, is, like Philemon, a partner in Paul’s work. The letter is personal, but nobody is an island: “and to the church that meets in your home.” Philemon’s life is set in a corporate Christian context. The early church, having no special buildings of its own, met in private houses.

Thanksgiving and Prayer (Philemon 4-7)

Paul’s prayer of thanks to God will introduce the theme of the letter, as words and ideas, summarily given here, are repeated later: love (vv. 5, 7, 9, 16), prayer (v. 22), a sharing, partnership (v. 17), the good, goodness (v. 14), heart(s) (vv. 12, 20), refreshed (v. 20), and brother (v. 20).

vv. 4-5 To refer to God as “my God” evokes the Psalms (cf. Psalm 3:7; 5:2; 7:1, 3; 18:2, 6; 22:1; 46:6, 11; 43:4,5, etc.).

v. 6 Paul’s argument is based on what has been called “interchange,” that mutuality of Christian life which, springing from common participation in the body of Christ, extends beyond mere common concern into actual exchange. Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul and to debit Paul’s bill as if he were Onesimus (vv. 17-19). The Greek word that says all this is *kōinonia*, and that is the key to verse 6.

The Greek word *kōinonia* is difficult to translate. “Fellowship” means, for many, simply the enjoyment of the company of other Christians; “sharing” usually implies mutual giving and receiving of material things; “interchange” itself, useful for highlighting the way *kōinonia* functions, seems a bit mechanical. The idea we need to grasp – the theme that dominates the letter – is that, in Christ, Christians not only belong to one another but actually become mutually identified, truly rejoicing with the happy and genuinely weeping with the sad (Romans 12:15; cf.). The key idea is “mutual participation.” The whole phrase then means “the mutual participation which is proper to your faith.”

The Request (Philemon 8-22)

As a runaway slave, Onesimus was liable to severe punishment, including even death. What Paul is concerned about is the treatment the slave will receive once he goes back to his master.

What was Paul asking Philemon to do? Here the matter becomes surprisingly complicated. From the letter itself it appears that Onesimus had run away from Philemon's household, perhaps taking some money as he went. This would not be unusual in the ancient world. Many slaves risked the wrath of their owners (backed up by stringent laws) in the attempt to escape.

At this point Onesimus could have joined a band of other ex-slaves, hidden himself in the underworld of a big city, or fled for refuge to a pagan shrine. Instead, whether by design or sheer providence, he had met Paul. And he had become a Christian.

Paul was now in a delicate position. Our knowledge of the slave laws then in the province of Asia is insufficient to tell us what his legal position would have been, but harboring a runaway slave was hardly the sort of behavior to earn Paul a good reputation or to help him regain his own freedom (v. 22). Paul was faced with two estranged Christians, both of whom, under God, owed their salvation to him (v. 19). But if the gospel both have embraced is the message of reconciliation (Colossians 1:18-20; 3:12-17; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21), then it must be able to bring together slave and free as it did Jew and Greek, or male and female (Colossians 3:11; Galatians 3:28). Paul is faced with a test case. It is no use preaching grand-sounding theory if it cannot be put into practice when it is needed. So he sends Onesimus back to Colosse, to Philemon, having done his best in this letter to ensure that a full reconciliation will take place.

But is their reconciliation Paul's main aim? It has been suggested that the real purpose of the letter was to ask Philemon to send Onesimus back to Paul. Thus verses 13-14 say that, though Paul would like to keep Onesimus, he prefers only to act with Philemon's consent.

If reconciliation is Paul's aim, the driving force of the whole letter is the prayer of verse 6, which, though cryptically expressed, is comprehensible in the light of the letter as a whole. Philemon is to learn in practice that *kōinonia* means an "interchange" between those who are Christ's. Paul first identifies himself closely with Philemon (vv. 1-7), then he establishes the closest possible ties between himself and Onesimus (vv. 10-14). The result of this "interchange" is that

Onesimus and Philemon are brought together – in Paul (vv. 17-20). As Luther saw, Paul plays Christ in the drama, identifying himself with both sinner and offended party, so making peace (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21), which contains many theological ideas here put into practical effect). The result is that the church, instead of fragmenting, grows together “into Christ” (v. 6).

Why did Paul not simply ask for Onesimus to be released from slavery? Why (for that matter) did he not order all Christian slave-owners to release all their slaves, rather than profit from an unjust social structure? Slavery was one of the really great evils of the ancient world, under which a large proportion of the population belonged totally to another person, for better or (usually) for worse, with no rights, no prospects, the possibility of sexual abuse, the chance of torture or death for trivial offences. Some slaves were fortunate in having kind or generous masters, and by the end of the first century some secular writers were expressing disgust at the institution. Why, then, did Paul not protest against the whole dehumanizing system?

Inveighing against slavery *per se* would have been totally ineffective; one might as well, in modern western society, protest against the mortgage system. Even if all Christians of Paul’s day were suddenly to release their slaves, it is by no means clear that the slaves themselves, or society in general, would benefit. A large body of people suddenly unemployed in the ancient world might not enjoy their freedom as much as they would imagine.

Paul’s method is subtler. He of course knows (1 Corinthians 7:21-23) that in principle it is better to be free than to be a slave. But, like Jesus, his way of changing the world is to plant a grain of mustard seed, which, inconspicuous at first, grows into a spreading tree. And in the meantime, he teaches slaves and masters to treat themselves, and each other, as human beings. Like the artist or poet, he does some of his finest work not by the obscure clarity of direct statement, but by veiled allusion and teasing suggestion.

Paul identifies himself with Onesimus. He is “my son” (v. 10), “my very heart” (v. 12), “very dear to me” (v. 16), and Paul will take responsibility for his debts (vv. 18-19). He assumes that Philemon would like to be able to help in his captivity, but Onesimus has been standing in for him, representing him (v. 13; cf. Philippians 2:30). This is possible because Onesimus and Philemon are, though they do not realize it, “dear brothers” to one another (v. 16). He then draws the conclusion proper: the welcome you would afford to *me* must be given to *him*, and the debts you would have put on *his* bill belong on *mine* instead (vv. 17-19). Philemon and

Onesimus are, in fact, in the same boat: both are debtors – to Paul (v. 19). The wheel thus comes full circle. If Philemon has a reputation for refreshing the hearts of the saints (v. 7), let him now refresh Paul's too (v. 20). Philemon and Onesimus are to be united – in Paul. The apostle, so to speak, plays Christ to them, his ministry of reconciliation mirroring that of Christ at every point (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

v. 8 Merely obeying an order would not necessarily elicit from Philemon that increase in understanding and love for which Paul has prayed (v. 6).

v. 10 Paul now builds on this foundation. “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus.” The delay in naming Onesimus has suggested to some that Paul is waiting until he has said as many good things about him as possible. This may be so, but Philemon surely knew as soon as anyone that his ex-slave had returned. The important point is that Onesimus has come back not so much as a slave but as a son. The name “Onesimus” literally means “useful,” deriving from the same root as the phrase “have some benefit” in verse 20. It was a common slave's name, starting most likely as a nickname.

vv. 12-13 “I am sending him back to you.” The verb could be a veiled judicial metaphor, “I am referring his case to you”; certainly Philemon has, legally, the final say. But if so the tone is ironic, since Paul is certainly not implying that he cannot make up his own mind as to what should be done.

v. 16 God may be intending that Philemon have Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but better than an slave, as a dear brother. This is not a request for emancipation. It simply applies what is said about relations between Christian masters and slaves in, e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:22 or Colossians 3:22-4:1).

v. 19 “I, Paul,” am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back.” Whether Paul has here taken the pen from the secretary for the first time (see Colossians 4:18), or whether this verse indicates that he has written this very personal letter all in his own hand, it is impossible to say, though many scholars incline toward the latter view. Paul uses the rhetorician's transparent trick of declaring that he will not mention something, thereby of course mentioning it (compare 2 Corinthians 9:4). It is this verse that tells us that Philemon had, like Onesimus, become a Christian under Paul's ministry.

v. 22 “And one thing more” – almost “oh, and by the way....” In keeping with the tone throughout, Paul refers almost casually to the vital follow-up visit. “Prepare a

guest room” (the word can mean “hospitality” in general, but it is almost universally agreed that it here refers to lodging, not board) for me.”

Closing Greetings (Philemon 23-25)

Paul announces that he plans to visit Colossae. Then he will see what effect his letter has had. Final greetings come from personnel known from Colossians 4:10-14. All are Paul’s fellow workers, an honored title shared by Philemon (v. 2), with the gentle hint that he will do now, as he gets the letter, what the other colleagues would do in the circumstances.

vv. 23-24 It is natural that at the head of the list of greetings should come Ephaphras, himself a Colossian, who had preached the gospel to his fellow-townpeople in the first place (Colossians 1:7-8) and was now back with Paul as a fellow prisoner for Christ Jesus. And then “Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow-workers.” This list is virtually identical with that in the parallel passage in Colossians (4:10-14). The one exception is that Jesus Justus is missing from the present roll call.

v. 25 The conventional tone of the closing greeting, once again, should not blind us to the truth it conveys to us, and the power that the expressed prayer conveyed to Philemon. It is a hard thing Paul has asked of him – a superhuman task of heartfelt reconciliation and forgiveness. If he is to do it without pride or anger, he cannot do it without grace. But grace is what is available: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,” who, though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, that we by his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9); the same Christ who took upon himself the nature, and the death, of the slave (Philippians 2:7-8). This Christ-shaped grace has informed Paul’s whole understanding of *kōinonia*, which has in turn dominated the whole letter. It is this same grace that is now to “be with your spirit,” to be let loose, by Paul’s prayers and words, in Philemon’s life, to make his home, and the church that meets there, the scene of a reconciliation that will prove beyond any doubt that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a matter of talk, but of power.