

Philemon

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Introduction

This is the shortest of Paul's inspired writings and the only one of the prison epistles addressed to an individual. Paul did write individual letters to other people and we have his letters to Timothy and Titus. This is not a lofty theological writing but one that applies an important Christian principle as we are to forgive each other as first taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. This epistle was written at the same time as the one to the Colossians from his prison stay in Rome in ~A.D. 58-60. Philemon had been led to Christ by Paul probably in Ephesus and had become a wealthy and influential member of the church at Colossae. His house was a meeting place of fellow Christians.

Onesimus (name means useful) had run away from his master to Rome and there God led him to Paul and it was through Paul's influence that God justified him. Some of our sins have earthly consequences that must be repaid. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and so deprived his master of his services and he may have even stolen money from him. This situation needs restoration and so Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon to seek forgiveness. Roman law allowed for the crucifixion of a runaway slave for they were afraid of a slave uprising as had happened about a century earlier led by Spartacus. So Onesimus took a grave risk in returning to his master to seek forgiveness. Although this is a personal letter, it is not closed and it is meant to be read to the entire church at Colossae. Paul will urge Philemon to put into practice the principles of Eph 4:32 and Col 3:13:

Eph 4:32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Col 3:13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

Slaves were being treated better by the time of this writing than in previous centuries. They could be educated as physicians, lawyers, artists, accountants, or whatever trade suited their masters the best. They had job security that ordinary free people did not have and had decent housing and food. However they were not free and some, like Onesimus desired that freedom above everything else. But when Onesimus became a Christian he came under the commands of Jesus Christ and had to repent of his sins and make recompense as needed. So Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colossae to his former master and it will be up to Philemon to choose how to treat this fellow Christian. Paul does not ask for Onesimus to be set free or to teach that slavery is evil but he asks him to treat him as a fellow brother in Christ. There is no assumption

anywhere in the letter that Onesimus would be free if Philemon forgave him so the letter cannot be used to support Paul's push for social reform regarding slavery.

Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,

Philemon 1:2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Philemon 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul dictated the letter to Philemon who was a Christian working for the Kingdom of God in Colossae. Timothy was with Paul during the writing and was known to Philemon as implied when Paul says "our brother". Thus Timothy is adding his support to Paul's appeal to Philemon. Most scholars agree that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was one of his sons. The wife would have had responsibility over the slaves so her assent to Paul's request is also needed. We heard of the Christian work of Archippus in our study of Colossians:

Col 4:17 And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

Paul also addresses this letter to the church as he intends it to be read to the entire congregation. Paul does not describe himself as an apostle but as a friend urging Philemon to use Christian principles in his treatment of Onesimus. He only says that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus and serving Him wherever he happens to be, even in a "real" prison because of his service to His Lord. Verse three is Paul's usual greeting and appears in all thirteen of his epistles. Grace is the means of salvation and peace with God is the result and Paul states that this grace and peace are from the Father and the Son as he affirms the deity of Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1:4 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,

Philemon 1:5 because I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints;

Philemon 1:6 and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

Philemon 1:7 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.

He now praises Philemon but not as a worldly person would do in flattering someone from whom a favor is requested. Paul had been involved in the salvation of Philemon and so he knew firsthand of his service to Christ. Epaphras was also Philemon's pastor at Colossae and had been with Paul in Rome so Paul certainly heard of the love of Philemon for Jesus from Epaphras. By stating that he knew of Philemon's love for Christ he was basing his request for mercy for Onesimus on Philemon's Christian character. Surely all of us can similarly state that we pray for

other Christians based upon our knowledge of their love for the Lord and for their ministry to us at various times. He uses the word “agape” for love that is a self-sacrificing love and a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Of course faith is a gift of God (Rom 12:3; Acts 3:16; Heb 2:4; Heb 12:2) and because of the love of Philemon toward all saints Paul knew that his faith was real. In verse six he prays that the fellowship of his faith might be effective through the real knowledge he has from Jesus Christ and for the sake of Christ. He mentions knowledge because this real knowledge precedes works:

Col 1:9-10 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

The Greek word translated fellowship is “koinonia” and means much more than just enjoying each other’s company for Christians belong to each other in their love for Christ. We are all “in Christ” and thus we are all in each other in a deep spiritual sense unknown by any worldly fellowship. He has not yet asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus but he is stating the basis for his request. Refreshed is a military term corresponding to the rest that an army receives after a march. Christians face many toils and troubles in their walk in the world and Paul knew that Philemon had been involved in refreshing fellow Christians from their struggles. Having heard of this work of Philemon, Paul’s heart was filled with love and joy also.

Philemon 1:8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper,

Philemon 1:9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you-- since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--

Philemon 1:10 I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus,

Philemon 1:11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

Based upon Paul’s stated knowledge of the Christian character of Philemon, Paul is now ready to state his request. Paul states that, because of the authority he has from Jesus Christ, he could order Philemon to do as he is about to request. However he does not want to make his request an order and appeals to him to grant his request for the sake of the love for Christ that they share. He appeals to him as the person that Philemon knows him to be and that he is aged and a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Regarding his age, he is probably about 60 years old now, which is rather old for people at that time but he also has many tribulations (2 Cor 11:23-30) that have added to his age above his physiological age. He also states that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus both physically and spiritually and both states also testify to his ability to make a special request. He then finally makes plain his appeal as he calls Onesimus his child for he was involved in his

conversion. He knows that Onesimus ran away from Philemon and then was useless to him but now that he is a Christian he has become especially useful to him and to Paul. It is interesting that Onesimus' name means useful and Paul plays on that name by saying that "Useful became useless and now is very useful." Onesimus is useful to Paul in his imprisonment and he can be useful to Philemon in service as a home slave and/or in service in Philemon's home church.

Philemon 1:12 And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, Philemon 1:13 whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

Philemon 1:14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will.

Paul has sent Onesimus with this letter to Philemon and he states that he would like for Onesimus to be sent back to serve Paul in prison. By stating that he is sending his very heart he is stating how deep in his love for this converted slave. He could have just kept Onesimus with him but he wanted Philemon to consent to such an action face-to-face with Onesimus. Paul also knew that the wrong done by Onesimus needed restitution made and forgiveness given and received. The process of forgiving and restoration of peace between Christians is critical to the sanctification process and our worship process:

Matt 6:14-15 "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Matt 5:23-24 "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Paul states that he did not want Philemon to send Onesimus to serve him in prison by his compulsive request. He wanted any action Philemon made on behalf of Onesimus to be made by Philemon's free will, meaning without any outside action.

Philemon 1:15 For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever,

Philemon 1:16 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.

Paul then states that he does not know the secret providence of God and it may be that Onesimus is now to return to serve with Philemon forever instead of coming back to Paul. Of course Paul wants God's will to be done over his own desires. If he comes back to live with Philemon then he would be more than a slave since he would be a beloved brother and could work both as a

slave and as a servant of Jesus Christ in the church there. Paul knew that this logic might fit within the scope of God's working through sin to accomplish His righteous purposes:

Rom 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

There are an infinite number of human contingencies involved in their actions over time and God uses them all to cause good to occur. Someone said "God knows all contingencies but does not act contingently." This means that God does not wait for people to act before He uses their actions to cause His good since He is omniscient from all time.

Philemon 1:17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

Philemon 1:18 But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

Philemon 1:19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Philemon 1:20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

He then asks Philemon to accept Onesimus even as he would accept Paul. The word translated "partner" is an accounting term meaning working in a business relationship. Of course the partnership Paul has in mind is the business of the ministry of Jesus Christ. He also says that if Onesimus owes Philemon any money that he may have stolen when he left or if a replacement slave had to be purchased then he asks that any such charge be paid by Paul's account. This offer is astounding in the time period of this letter although the exact amount owed is not known. A common slave worker could be bought for about 500 denarii (a denarius was a laborer's ordinary daily wage) but a skilled slave would be worth at least 100 times as much. Paul's offer is a picture of the work of Jesus Christ in that God is wronged by our sin and Jesus paid the price necessary for our restitution with God. So Philemon represents God, Onesimus represents us, and Paul represents Jesus. Of course the debt we owe God is infinite so only the infinite God could make such restitution for us before God. He then writes with his own hand to prove that his offer to pay whatever the former slave owes is genuine and of legal validity. He does mention that Philemon should remember that he owes Paul his own life since Paul led him to the Lord. It seems that Paul is saying that Philemon can charge it to the bank in heaven! He also says that he will benefit spiritually by Philemon's forgiving Onesimus for the sake of Christ and this will be an act that will refresh his heart in Christ. This act would also strengthen the church at Colossae by such an outward act that would be so counter to the culture of the time.

Philemon 1:21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

Philemon 1:22 And at the same time also prepare me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

Paul then says that he has confidence that Philemon will obey his request and that he will even exceed his request regarding the forgiveness of Onesimus and the use of him in either coming back to Paul or in serving Philemon in his home and church. His confidence is not based upon the request coming from an apostle but because Paul knows that Philemon is a Christian and that he will obey the commands of Jesus to love and forgive those who offend us. He then also asks that a place be prepared for him in hope that by his prayers he might be granted the time to come to Colossae to visit. An impending visit by the apostle would also have been a little pressure since he would be there to witness the forgiveness and the work of Onesimus in the church there at the home of Philemon. The accountability that we have to our superiors is an important motive for obedience and their leadership actions are also accountable:

Heb 13:17 Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Rom 13:1-2 Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ²Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

Philemon 1:23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

Philemon 1:24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

Philemon 1:25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

In closing Paul sends greetings of other people with him. These five people were also mentioned at the end of the letter to Colossae. Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and was arrested in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and went with Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). We know a lot about Mark who wrote the Gospel but we know nothing more about Justus. Epaphras was mentioned in Col 1:7 as the founder of the church at Colossae and may have been the pastor of the church meeting in the home of Philemon. Although Demas was serving with Paul when this letter was written, he later deserted Paul because he loved the world more than the Lord:

2Tim 4:10 for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

We may never know the true heart of a person for people can fool us as Demas seems to have deceived Paul. However we are reminded of the words of Jesus regarding such temptations possible effects on a person who is not one of the elect. Jesus gave the parable of the sower where three of the four types were not elect and fell away:

Matt 13:22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

He ends this letter with his famous benediction concerning the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ being with his spirit. This grace would be sufficient for Philemon to forgive Onesimus just as it is sufficient for us to forgive those who offend us. The forgiveness of God for His people is the act that changed the world one person at a time. Comparing the forgiveness of God for our sins against Him to what people do against us allows us to realize that there is no comparison and we should readily forgive others.