

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

The Letters to Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians all date from Paul's first imprisonment at Rome, and were probably written in 62 A.D. This is the most personal of Paul's Letters in the New Testament. Onesimus, Philemon's slave, ran away. In Rome he met Paul, and became a Christian. Now he is going back to his master, and the fact that he is, shows the strong influence Christianity has! But as a "runaway," he is a criminal! Yet he comes back to Philemon as a *brother in Christ!* This makes it a "whole new ball-game!" Paul writes this Letter to Philemon to persuade him to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ, not as a runaway slave.

This type of thing must have happened many times in the early church. Slavery was the foundation of the economy in the early world. Aristotle, one of the greatest Greek Philosophers, said that most of the human race were made by the Creator to be slaves. Half the world of the First Century were slaves. Roman law made a slave an animal with no rights at all. His master could sell him, give him away, torture him, kill him, drown him in the sea - all legally! Roman law would not interfere in the matter. Even the Jewish Law permitted slavery, but it set rules for it that prevented cruelty. If a Jew mutilated his slave, the slave was automatically set free. The teachers of the Law said a runaway slave must make good the time of his absence. This may be what Paul had in mind in *verses 18-19*.

Christianity did not prohibit slavery, but its teaching killed it in time. Christianity says: "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (*Gal. 3:28*). These were radical ideas! But this TRUTH of the "brotherhood of man" (*Acts 17:26*) could not leave the world unchanged!!!

This Letter shows us that Christianity does not change man's political or social condition and rank. Onesimus the slave did not become a free-man by obeying Christ. In all this we have practical lessons on Christian conduct. We also have examples of love and concern for others. We see Paul, an apostle of Christ, putting in a good word for a slave, to make peace between he and his master.

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

¹From Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy—

To our friend and fellow worker Philemon, ²and the church that meets in your house, and our sister Apphia, and our fellow soldier Archippus:

³May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Philemon's Love and Faith

⁴Every time I pray, brother Philemon, I mention you and give thanks to my God. ⁵For I hear of your love for all God's people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. ⁶My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love and faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in

1. **From Paul, a prisoner.** He is a prisoner at Rome as he writes this, but living in his own house (*Acts 28:16 and note*). Our brother Timothy. This shows us that Timothy was at Rome with Paul. Philemon. This man must have lived in Colossae. Paul had brought him to Christ (*verse 19*), but this may have taken place at Ephesus (Johnson thinks so). They were friends and fellow workers in the gospel. Probably Paul intends to point to the fact that all Christians, even slaves and masters, are fellow workers.

2. **And the church.** House-churches were common in the first century, but they also met in the temple (*Acts 2:46*), and in other buildings (*Acts 19:9-10*). Apphia. She may have been Philemon's wife. "Sister" may, like "brother" Timothy, point to one who takes an active role in the gospel. Compare *Rom. 16:12*. Archippus. Some think he was Philemon's son. "Fellow soldier" shows he was a minister in the gospel (evangelist). He is mentioned in *Col. 4:17*. Meyer points to the fact of Paul in those associated with Philemon in the house, but not going beyond the limits of the house.

3. **Give you grace and peace.** This is Paul's usual word of greeting. In Jewish theology, one main purpose of the Messiah was to bring grace and peace (*see Luke 2:14*).

4. **Every time I pray.** Here he begins to speak directly to Philemon. Paul made it a habit to pray for God's people.

5. **For I hear of your love.** Note Paul puts Philemon's love ahead of his faith.

6. **Our fellowship with you.** Bengelius thinks this means Philemon partaking of faith in common with other Christians. A deeper understanding. *See Phil. 1:9-11* and notes.

we have in our life in Christ. ⁷Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have cheered the hearts of all God's people.

A Request for Onesimus

⁸For this reason I could be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to order you to do what should be done. ⁹But love compels me to make a request instead. I do this even though I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus and at present also a prisoner for his sake. ¹⁰So I make a request to you on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while in prison I have become his spiritual father. ¹¹At one time he was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. ¹³I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place.

Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. 7

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 8 9 10 11

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for 12 13

7. **Your love.** By this Paul must mean Philemon's *active Christian life*. Paul speaks about the moment of jubilation he experienced when he heard the good news about Philemon and the messianic community at Colossae (probably brought by Epaphras, *Col. 1:7-8*).

8. **I could be bold enough.** Since he has heard so much about the love which Philemon has, he has confidence in what he *would do*, to just go ahead and order him to accept Onesimus. This would be his right as an apostle.

9. **But love compels me.** "Yet love compels me not to use my authority, but to make a request instead. I have the right to order you, but I will not do this." [The TEV follows Lightfoot in reading ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΣ = ambassador.]

10. **Who is my own son in Christ.** It is possible that Epaphras met Onesimus in Rome, and brought him to Paul. However, it was Paul who won him to Christ and became his spiritual father.

11. **At one time.** Onesimus may have been a troublemaker in the past. The *Expositor's Greek Testament* says: "As applied to Onesimus the reference must be to something wrong done by him; the fear of being punished for this was presumably his reason for running away from his master." **But now.** The "old" Onesimus no longer exists (*2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:6-7*). He will serve Philemon as a good slave now!

12. **I am sending him.** This means: "Onesimus wants to come back to you now, and I am sending him." **And with him goes my heart.** This shows the close friendship between Paul and Onesimus. To be cruel to him would be cruel to Paul as well.

13. **To keep him here.** "I am the ambassador of Christ. Since I know you would help me if you were here, Onesimus your slave could help me in your place. And I would like to keep him here, since he has already been so much help to me."

¹⁴However, I do not want to force you to help me; rather, I would like for you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do a thing unless you agree.

¹⁵It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. ¹⁶And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me! And how much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord!

¹⁷So, if you think of me as your partner, welcome him back just as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong, or owes you anything, charge it to my account. ¹⁹Here, I will write this with my own hand: *I, Paul, will pay you back.* (I should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your very life to me.) ²⁰So, my brother, please do me this favor, for the Lord's sake; cheer up my heart, as a brother in Christ!

the gospel. But I did not 14
want to do anything without
your consent, so that any
favor you do will be sponta-
neous and not forced. Per- 15
haps the reason he was
separated from you for a
little while was that you
might have him back for
good—no longer as a slave, 16
but better than a slave, as a
dear brother. He is very dear
to me but even dearer to
you, both as a man and as a
brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a 17
partner, welcome him as you
would welcome me. If he has 18
done you any wrong or owes
you anything, charge it to
me. I, Paul, am writing this 19
with my own hand. I will pay
it back—not to mention that
you owe me your very self. I 20
do wish, brother, that I may
have some benefit from you
in the Lord: refresh my heart

14. **However.** Paul could have kept Onesimus and Philemon would surely have pardoned him. But this might not have been the ethical way to do it. Paul sends him back to Philemon, so that it is clearly his *free will* when he takes Onesimus back into his *family*.

15. **It may be.** "I know it made you unhappy when your slave ran away, but think about this. This may be God's providence at work. He will now be your slave for life." [Some see a reference to *Deut. 15: 16-17* in this.]

16. **He is not just a slave.** Here is the vital difference in the slave - master relationship!!! This slave is now a *brother in Christ* to his master. **How much he means to me!** To prevent any possibility of Philemon being offended because Paul is telling him his slave is his *brother*, Paul mentions the Christian love which also binds him to this slave as a *brother*.

17. **Welcome him back.** Christian love means: "*to treat others as God has treated you.*" Paul says to treat this slave just as if he were Paul himself.

18. **Charge it to my account.** Some think this implies Onesimus had robbed Philemon, but this is not necessarily so. It was enough of a crime to run away.

19. **I, Paul, will pay you back.** This is Paul's *promissory-note* guaranteeing repayment. These are not empty words! This is a legal form! Roman law would enforce this, if Philemon put in the claim. **You owe your very life to me.** Paul had led him out of the guilt and power of sin, into the safety of Christ! Yet Paul will not make this an *obligation* to force him to take back his slave.

20. **Please do me this favor.** By cheerfully doing what I ask.

²¹I am sure, as I write this, that you will do what I ask—in fact I know that you will do even more. ²²At the same time, get a room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the prayers of all of you and give me back to you.

Final Greetings

²³Epaphras, who is in prison with me for the sake of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings, ²⁴and so do my fellow workers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

²⁵May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

in Christ. Confident of your 21
obedience, I write to you,
knowing that you will do
even more than I ask.

And one thing more: pre- 22
pare a guest room for me,
because I hope to be restored
to you in answer to your
prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow 23
prisoner for Christ Jesus,
sends you greetings. And so 24
do Mark, Aristarchus, De-
mas and Luke, my fellow
workers.

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

21. **I am sure.** "As I write this letter, I am sure you will do even more than I ask." Some see in this a hint of the *authority* which Paul actually had (compare *Acts 13:8-12*). Some also see in this a hint that Philemon would give Onesimus his freedom.

22. **At the same time.** All the Letters written during the first imprisonment show that Paul expected to be set free from his confinement. [Contrast this with *2 Tim. 4:6*.]

23. **Epaphras.** See notes on *Col. 1:7; 4:12*. He was also in prison with Paul. *SUNAICHMALOTOS* means "a prisoner of war." But Paul may only mean that Epaphras was with him in his imprisonment.

24. **My fellow workers.** These are also in Rome with him. **Mark.** See the introduction to the Gospel of Mark. **Aristarchus.** See *Acts 27:2*. **Demas.** See note on *Col. 4:14*. **Luke.** See introduction to the Gospel of Luke.

25. **With you all.** Paul's benediction is to all mentioned in this Letter including all who make up the church in Philemon's house. See *verses 2-3*.