

Philemon

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Philemon

Chapter 1

Introduction

It has been well said that the letter from Paul to his friend Philemon is the finest specimen of early, personal, Christian correspondence extant. It was written to commend a returning, runaway, thieving slave to his master. With characteristic generosity and a deep sense of the importance of maintaining a standard of righteousness, Paul offers to be surety for this man, Onesimus, and agrees to meet every responsibility as to his past evildoing. He knew that the life of Onesimus had been changed completely by divine grace, and so he unhesitatingly requested Philemon to receive him, no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

Luther said, “We are all God’s Onesimi.” For in this incident we have a striking picture of our lost condition by nature and practice and of the activities of divine grace on our behalf. The letter sets forth most beautifully the great truths of forgiveness on the ground of the expiatory work of Another and acceptance in the Beloved.

In Philemon himself we have an excellent example of what Christianity could do for one who was, doubtless, a heathen idolater before he was brought to know Christ, but in whom the love of the Spirit was manifested richly after he was brought to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Apparently, he was converted through the personal ministry of Paul, although the Apostle had never visited Colosse where Philemon resided.

Although so definitely personal, this letter is as truly part of the inspired Word of God as any other portion of the Scriptures. But inspiration leaves room for the writer's personality to manifest itself, and in this intimate epistle we get a wonderful view into the very depths of the Apostle's heart. It is a remarkable thing that so large a part of the New Testament is made up of letters, a form of literature which leaves room for the most simple, homely touches and which stands in vivid contrast to heavy theological treatises. It is as though our God and Father would speak to our hearts in a tender, familiar manner, calculated to win our fullest confidence.

This letter may have been written by Paul while in prison in Cesarea, as some think, but more likely in Rome. Onesimus, a bondman of the household of Philemon, had run away after robbing his master, and, in some way, had come in contact with Paul, through whom he was led to Christ. He felt he should return home to Colosse and submit himself to Philemon, so Paul wrote this letter to explain matters clearly.

Paul was not a recluse. Though in some respects he lived a lonely life for the gospel's sake (**1 Cor. 9:5**), foregoing the joy and comfort of wife and home that he might be freer to go about preaching the Word, yet he was a man of deep emotions and of very sincere affection. He valued Christian fellowship. He rejoiced when those he loved in Christ labored with acceptance and lived well to the glory of God. He was deeply pained when any turned away and made shipwreck of their discipleship (**2 Tim. 4:10**). His personal letters show how deep was his interest in others and how fervently he loved his converts and friends. Read carefully this epistle, with these considerations in view, and you will see how true it is.

This letter furnishes us with one of the most delightful pictures of the grace of God, as revealed in the gospel, that we could ever expect to find. Like Onesimus, we have all wronged our rightful Lord and Master. We have misused His mercies, trampled on His grace, and robbed Him by applying for our own selfish purposes that which He has entrusted to us to be used for His honor and glory. But the Lord Jesus has paid all our debt, discharged every obligation to the broken law of God. Now we can come to the Father in His name, assured of a welcome, and knowing we shall not only be forgiven, but also that we are now accepted in the Beloved and brought into the very family of God. It should ever be our happy privilege, as it is our great responsibility, to manifest the same grace to others as that which has been lavished on us.

Chapter 2

Christianity and Slavery

Philemon 1-25

The spread of Christianity did not drive slavery out of the world all at once. But from the beginning it established a new conception of human values, and Christian masters learned to esteem and treat their slaves as brothers and sisters in Christ. Under Roman law it would not have proved a kindness, in all circumstances, to free the slaves. But as the centuries went on and men became more enlightened, it was through the teachings of Christ and His apostles that slavery disappeared from the civilized world.

But we have stood too long at the door, as it were. Let us enter in and explore the precious things here revealed.

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother, (vv. 1-7)

“A prisoner of Jesus Christ,... unto Philemon.” This letter was written, in all likelihood, from that hired house in Rome (**Acts 28:30**) where Paul was kept in durance for two years while he waited to appear before Nero. Philemon was a Colossian believer who owed his conversion to Paul (see v. 19). The letter, as we have mentioned above, concerns the

return of a runaway slave. *Paul* means “the little one” and *Philemon*, “the loving one,” so this is a letter from the little one to the loving one.

“Apphia... Archippus.” *Apphia* is a feminine name and refers doubtless to Philemon’s wife. *Archippus* was apparently a young preacher, perhaps their son. None can speak with certainty, though, as to this.

“Grace... and peace.” It is the customary apostolic salutation uniting those of the Gentiles who said “Grace” (*Chans*, or *Gratia*) and the Jews who said “Peace” (*Shalom*) in ordinary greetings. Both are united in Christ.

“Making mention of thee always in my prayers.” How real was the interest that the apostle had in this friend and convert! He prayed frequently and regularly for him.

“Hearing of thy love and faith.” The two went hand-in-hand. Philemon’s genuine Christian character was well-known. Paul rejoiced in the way others spoke of his friend’s true piety. Faith works (or, is manifested) by love. Philemon was one to whom the Lord Jesus was precious, and so his heart went out in affection toward all who were in Christ.

“Thy faith... effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.” This was not fulsome flattery, but recognition of what the grace of God had wrought in the life and experience of this man. Because of this, Paul felt he could write with confidence as he was about to bring before Philemon the case of Onesimus. He would see every good impulse come to perfection in a practical way. Remember, he was about to plead for a brotherly reception to Onesimus, formerly a thieving, runaway slave.

“Great joy and consolation in thy love.” Nothing is more precious than the manifestation of the Spirit of Christ in his people. Philemon’s fine, gracious spirit had made him a

blessing to many. Now Paul was about to test him further. He adds, "The bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee." For "bowels" we might properly substitute "hearts" in English. The thought is that Philemon's love had cheered the inward being of many a believer.

Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly, (vv. 8-14)

"I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient." Because of the close tie that bound these two together in Christ and also because of his apostolic authority, Paul might have been free to give a definite commandment as to what would be befitting in the treatment of Onesimus on his return, now that he, too, had become a Christian.

"For love's sake I rather beseech thee." Yet he did not choose to exercise such authority, but preferred to lay the matter before his friend, reminding him that he was now "Paul the aged," in such a way as to give him the opportunity of manifesting that love which ever characterized him, freely, of his own volition and not as acting under stress of any kind.

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds." This makes it clear that Onesimus was Paul's child in the faith. He had won him for Christ, and he was

naturally concerned as to his future. Where the grace of Christ rules in the heart, *I command* becomes *I beseech*.

“In time past... unprofitable, but now profitable.” It is a play upon words. *Onesimus* means “profitable” or “helpful.” He had been anything but that in the past. Now all was changed, and he was living up to his name. We “are all gone out of the way”; we “are together become unprofitable” (**Rom. 3:12**) in our sinful condition. It is grace alone that enables those who are saved to count for God.

“Whom I have sent again.” Under existing conditions, because of both Roman law and Philemon’s character, Paul felt it wisest and best that this slave should return to his master. So, rather than act on the letter of the Mosaic law (**Deut. 23:15-16**), he sent him back with this letter of commendation.

“Whom I would have retained with me.” Paul would have been glad if he had felt free to keep Onesimus with him, as he had proved useful in many ways, and he considered that he might have accepted such service as though it were done by Philemon himself.

“Without thy mind would I do nothing.” He would not presume on Philemon’s friendship, however, and as there was no opportunity to consult him in the matter, he preferred to have Onesimus return to his former home.

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me

even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. (vv. 15-21)

“That thou shouldest receive him for ever.” Now that both master and slave were one in Christ, Paul trusted there might be no future rupture of their association, but rather a fellowship on much higher ground than in times past.

“Not now as a servant, but... a brother beloved.” This gives us to realize what vast changes Christianity was working already in the early church. The onetime slave was now to be recognized as a beloved brother in the Lord. Onesimus in his wayward career pictures the course of all unsaved people. Repentant and truly converted, he goes home to his master. The great doctrine of substitution is illustrated by Paul’s offer to pay his debt. The truth of acceptance is suggested when Paul intimates that they are to show their regard for him by the way they treat Onesimus. It is a delightful miniature of the evangel.

“If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.” What a beautiful picture is this of our acceptance in Christ! In the case of every saved sinner it is as though our Lord presents him to the Father saying, “If Thou count Me as a Partner, receive him as Myself.” We “are complete in him” (**Col. 2:10**), for, “As he is, so are we in this world” (**1 John 4:17**). He says to the Father, “Thou... hast loved them, [even] as thou hast loved me” (**John 17:23**). How foolish Onesimus would have been if he had thrown away Paul’s letter and undertaken to plead his own case! There can be no greater folly than to ignore the mediatorial work of Christ and seek to approach God in one’s own fancied merit.

“If he... oweth thee aught, put that on mine account.” It is evident that Onesimus had robbed his master. Paul offers to

settle everything for him even as our blessed Lord paid all our debt upon the cross that we might be justified from all things.

“Thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.” Delicately, Paul reminds Philemon that it was through him that Philemon had been brought to know Christ. Thus Paul felt sure he could count on Philemon acting now in accordance with his wishes.

“Let me have joy of thee in the Lord.” Loving compliance with the Apostle’s request on the part of Philemon would gladden the heart of him who was a prisoner for the sake of Christ’s name. When one has been saved by grace, it is to be expected that he will walk in grace toward others, even to those whom he feels have mistreated and deceived him.

“Knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.” Not for a moment did Paul doubt but that Philemon would do that which had been asked of him. He did this with the full assurance in his own heart that he would not be disappointed, but that Philemon would go even beyond what was requested in true Christian charity and brotherliness. So the letter was committed to Onesimus, who wended his way back to Colosse, assured that all would be forgiven and his would be a new standing altogether in the household of his former master.

But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (vv. 22-25)

“Through your prayers.” Paul confidently expected his acquittal, and believed he would be free again to visit his friends and minister among them. He counted on God

answering the prayers of many on his behalf. Nor was he disappointed, for according to the most authentic records that have come down to us, he was set free when he appeared before Nero and permitted to labor on in the gospel for several years before he was rearrested. He was then taken again to Rome, where he was incarcerated in the Mamertine dungeon, and after official condemnation he was beheaded as a martyr for the gospel of Christ.

“Epaphras, my fellowprisoner.” This was the man of God who had come to Paul from Colosse, bringing an account of the love of the saints and also of the efforts of certain teachers of evil doctrine to pervert this young church (see **Col. 1:7-8; 4:12**). He seems to have shared Paul’s imprisonment for a time at least, whether voluntarily or otherwise we are not told.

“My fellowlabourers.” The four names mentioned are all of real interest. Mark was the relative of Barnabas, whom Paul refused to take on his second missionary journey, but who went with Barnabas when the two older men separated. In the years that followed he had lived down his early lack of reliability, and Paul now valued his fellowship and testimony (see **2 Tim. 4:11**).

Aristarchus was a devoted friend to Paul, and at this time he was also a fellow prisoner with him (**Col. 4:10**). The names of Demas and Luke, the beloved physician, are here linked together, as also in **Colossians 4:14**. Alas, later on they were separated because of Demas’ defection. He forsook Paul the prisoner because he loved this present world (**2 Tim. 4:10**).

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” It is the customary Pauline salutation, emphasizing the grace whereby alone we are saved, and which was the distinguishing mark that authenticated all the Apostle’s genuine letters.

Paul's personal correspondence was the outcome of a heart devoted to Christ. What of our letters? Do we seek to help others to know Him better as we write?
