

PHILEMON

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Chapter 1:1-14

INTRODUCTION

The letter of Philemon is a personal letter. It serves as a splendid example of Christian courtesy.

Paul's object in writing this letter to his friend, Philemon, seems to have been twofold. First, to intercede for the runaway slave, Onesimus, and second, to ask Philemon to prepare a lodging for Paul himself.

Philemon was a generous-hearted man whose home was the gathering center for the local church—V. 2. He was a source of refreshing to the saints—V. 7.

In the letter, Paul implied that he expected him to free the lately converted slave, Onesimus—V. 21. Paul felt free to ask these favours because that under God, Philemon owed his salvation to Paul—V. 19.

Onesimus was, evidently, a runaway slave who had wronged his master in some way—Vs. 11,18. He was of the city of Colosse, and the letter to the Colossians and this brief epistle seem to have been written at the same time. See Col. 4:7-9.

OUTLINE

1. Salutations—Vs. 1-3
2. Thanksgiving—Vs. 4-7.
3. Entreaty for Onesimus—Vs. 8-21.
4. Conclusion—Vs. 22-25.

SALUTATIONS

“Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow-labourer”—V. 1. Verses 1,9,10,13,23 all indicate that Paul wrote this epistle from his prison in Rome. So this is one of the prison epistles. Paul's closest earthly friend, Timothy, was associated with him in writing the letter.

The principal character addressed, Philemon, whose name means, affectionate, was a fellow-labourer. Whether he had an official place in the assembly or not is not stated.

“And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”—Vs. 2,3. Tradition holds that Apphia was the wife of Philemon. However, there is no internal evidence to confirm this.

“Archippus” whose name means, master of the horse or horse chief, was Paul's fellow-soldier, and a minister of the Gospel—Col. 4:17. He may have been pastor of the assembly in Colosse. The “Church in thy house” indicates that, as in most places, the church met in local places or homes of some of its members. Paul's usual benediction of grace is found in these verses.

THANKSGIVING

“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”—Vs. 4,5. Paul’s prayer list was long. As he mentioned some to God in prayer, he was thankful. As he prayed for others, they brought tears to his eyes. Philemon and his associates were some for whom he could pray with thanksgiving. Philemon’s great faith and love were items of exceeding joy to the apostle.

“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.”—Vs. 6,7. The word “Communication” means, fellowship. Paul prayed that the fellowship of his faith might become effectual or operative. “By acknowledging” is, a full knowledge in the Greek language and we can render the verse further by this, “Of every good thing in us for Christ.”

Paul was overjoyed and the saints refreshed by Philemon. He must have been a beloved brother.

“Bowels” have reference to the affections of the heart or of the tender affections.

“Refreshed” is, to cause to rest, soothe or refresh. Certainly it is a blessing to be associated with such a person. He was a sweet savor of Christ.

ENTREATY FOR ONESIMUS

“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”—Vs. 8,9. Paul had authority from the Lord to command or enjoin. Yet because of his love for Philemon, he used entreaties instead. His feelings for his friends were very deep.

“Paul the aged” is rendered by not a few as in the R. V. margin, Paul an ambassador.” At the time of this writing, we do not feel that Paul was more than sixty at the outside, hence being far from being aged. We would prefer to go along with the Amplified Version and others, that he was Paul the Ambassador, which is in keeping with his letters elsewhere, as well as being in keeping with facts. Also, in this entreaty, he was a Prisoner of Jesus Christ, which fact would add to his weighty letter.

“I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds”—V. 10. “My son Onesimus” indicates that Paul had led the man to Christ and was his father in the Gospel. The proper name, “Onesimus,” means, useful or profitable. One gives its meaning as “helpful.”

Note Paul’s use of the words, “I beseech thee” in both verses 9 and 10.

“Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me”—V. 11. “Unprofitable” means, useless, detrimental, causing loss. “Profitable” means, highly useful, very profitable. Paul seems to make a play on the name of Onesimus, one meaning of which is, profitable. The word “Joy” in V. 20 is a similar word in meaning. It means, to receive profit, which seems again to be a play on words.

“Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels”—V. 12. Paul recognized his duty to two fellow believers. Onesimus should have and did go back to his owner. “My own bowels” is rendered by the R. V. as “My very heart.” This is probably Paul’s full meaning. Parents of the time and day in which this was written used this term in speaking of their children.

“Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel”—V. 13. Paul needed devoted men with him to make trips to the churches, to carry epistles, and messages, and to minister to him personally, as he was unable to minister to himself while in prison. However, as much as he needed Onesimus, he realized that he was duty-bound to return him to his

master.

“But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly”—V. 14. “Without thy mind would I do nothing.” Onesimus was the property of Philemon. Paul would not try to retain the slave without the permission of the owner.

If Paul had kept Onesimus in his service and requested Philemon to leave him with him in Rome, we do not doubt that his request would have been approved and granted. But by sending him back, whatever Philemon did, it would be from grace and not from restraint.

NOT A SLAVE BUT A BELOVED BROTHER

“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?”-Vs. 15,16. We could ask the question, Why does God in His providence allow some things that seem to be so wrong? Note that Onesimus left home a sinner. He returned a saint. Philemon lost him for a short time, but gained him forever. He lost a slave but gained a brother. God allowed all the apparent evil that He might bring about the great good from it. Man intended evil, but God meant it all for good.

Paul implied that he expected Philemon to release Onesimus from slavery. He, Philemon, was not to receive him back as a slave, but as a brother. Such a step would do away with the former relationship of master and slave. Onesimus was now a member of the same heavenly family as Philemon, hence, dear in the Lord. Doubtless, he had been long in the service of Philemon, so dear in the flesh also. As Paul’s spiritual son, he was dear to him also.

“If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself”-V. 17. This may be rendered, If you count me as one having a common interest. So if Philemon still counted Paul a friend, he would receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, and Onesimus would no longer be a slave.

PUT THAT ON MINE ACCOUNT

“If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account”-V. 18. Whether Onesimus owed Philemon from having stolen from him or just in his lack of service to him as a slave, is not clear. Paul asked that all obligations be put to his account. How like Christ!

“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”-V. 19. Paul emphasized this statement by saying that he wrote it with his own hand. He affirmed that he would pay all.

He also gave Philemon a gentle reminder as to how much he owed Paul. Under God, Paul had been the instrument of Christ in bringing the message of salvation to Philemon, and that is the greatest thing any earthly man can do for us.

“Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord”-V. 20. “Let me have joy of thee,” This word “Joy” would be that Philemon receive back Onesimus and give him his liberty. Some give the word “Joy” as profit or as a return on an investment. It can bear that meaning.

Philemon could refresh Paul’s bowels in the Lord by doing to and with Onesimus as Paul wished Him to do.

“Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say”-V. 21. Paul had confidence that Philemon would not only obey him in all his request, but that he would do more. This “More than I say” implies that Paul expected him to liberate Onesimus with a full

release from slavery.

“But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you”-V. 22. This verse with Phil. 1:25; Heb. 13:23 implies that Paul had faith from God for his deliverance from what has been called his first Roman imprisonment, and we feel definitely that he was released for a season.

“There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus”-V. 23. Epaphras had preached Christ in Colosse-Col. 1:7, and was one of them. We are not told why he was a prisoner. Surely his greetings were appreciated.

“Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers”-V. 24. Surely the warm greetings of these four “Fellowlabourers” would warm the heart of Philemon and the church that met in his house.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”-V. 25. This verse may be called Paul’s trademark and it expresses God’s attitude to His people, and as it is one of grace, it does not need to be enlarged upon.

In the narrative of Paul and Onesimus, there is a beautiful parallel of Christ’s work for the sinner. Paul put himself out for the runaway slave and pleaded his cause with all that was within him. Onesimus had wronged his rightful owner, even as we had done wrong to God, our Creator. Yet, like Christ, Paul stood in the gap and brought the two alienated parties together.

Paul did not plead right or justice, but as it were, stripped himself of his strength, and did not use even the force he had. He said, in essence, put his debt to my account, I will repay it. I will stand in his stead, identify him with me. If you love me, treat him well.

Paul was the friend of both parties, even as was Christ the friend of both God and man. Paul presented the offender to the offended without denying the fault of the offender.

His success was a triumph of grace and love on his part and also, on the part of Philemon. Onesimus was the recipient of the grace and love, even as we have received God’s favor through the work of Christ.

Onesimus was to be received back, even as we, into full favor and that forever.