

INTRODUCTION AND PHILEM. 1-25

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I. Introduction

A. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters – only 335 words in the Greek text. It was written by Paul from prison (or house arrest) to a dear friend named Philemon, a man Paul had converted years earlier, probably during his ministry in Ephesus (mid or late 52 to mid or late 55).

1. Timothy is mentioned as a sender probably because he was privy to and supportive of Paul's position in the sensitive matter that forms the main subject of the letter. It's also quite possible that Timothy knew Philemon. It's clear from the letter that Paul is the author.

2. Though the letter is very personal, Paul includes as addressees Aphia, Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon's home.

a. Most commentators believe Aphia is Philemon's wife, and some assume that Archippus is their son, but we really can't be sure. Almost certainly they have some connection with Philemon's household or to the church that meets in his home.

b. Some commentators believe that Paul's acknowledging Aphia, Archippus, and the house church in the salutation merely was a matter of courtesy and does not mean they were actual addressees. It seems more likely to me that Paul wants the household and house church to know what he is expecting from Philemon (and thus indirectly of them).

B. The letter concerns a slave named Onesimus who ran away from his master, Philemon, and perhaps compounded his crime by robbing him before fleeing. (Onesimus means "useful" and, for obvious reasons, was a common name for slaves.) While on the run, Onesimus somehow encountered Paul, who was in prison or under house arrest. Paul brought Onesimus to Christ, and Onesimus became a godsend to Paul in his difficult situation. Though Paul would like to have kept him, he felt it necessary to send Onesimus back to Philemon. He does so with this letter.

C. This letter is closely related to Colossians.

1. Both are written by Paul from prison; both include Timothy as a sender; both refer to Epaphras (Col. 1:7; Philem. 23) and Archippus (Col. 4:17; Philem. 2); both include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke among Paul's companions (Col. 4:10, 14; Philem. 24); and both refer to Onesimus (Col 4:9; Philem. 10).

2. Since Onesimus is a resident of Colossae (Col. 4:9), we're safe in assuming that Philemon was also. So both letters almost certainly were written at the same time and place and sent together to Colossae.

3. There's a debate about whether Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus or Rome when he wrote Colossians and Philemon. I'm with those like F. F. Bruce, Peter O'Brien, Markus Barth & Helmut Blanke, Donald Guthrie, D. A. Carson & Douglas Moo who think Rome is more likely. In that case, it was written in the early 60s.

4. Guthrie states: "[Philemon's] close connection with Colossians makes it virtually certain that the two epistles belong to the same period and the most probable theory is that Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus took them both to Colossae at the same time (i.e., during the first Roman imprisonment)."

D. One of the big questions is how Onesimus happened to encounter Paul while being on the run. Perhaps Onesimus fled as far as Rome because he thought its teeming cosmopolitan population offered obvious advantages to a person trying to hide from authorities. Maybe when he was there he had second thoughts about his escape and, knowing that Paul was an influential friend of Philemon, sought out Paul for refuge and assistance.

E. Interestingly, we know from the early second-century writings of Ignatius, a leader of the church in Antioch, that a man named Onesimus was an influential church leader in Ephesus. It is possible this was Philemon's former slave.

II. The Text

A. Opening (1-3): **¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, the brother, to Philemon, our beloved fellow-worker; ²Aphia, the sister; Archippus our fellow-soldier; and the church that meets in your home: ³grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

1. Archippus is cryptically addressed in Col. 4:17: Tell Archippus, "See that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord."

2. House-churches often are mentioned in the N.T. On occasion the whole congregation in one city might be small enough to meet in the house of one of its members. In other places, house-churches appear to have been smaller circles of fellowship within the larger group.

B. Thanksgiving (4-7): **⁴I always give thanks to my God when mentioning you in my prayers ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and the faith which you have in the Lord Jesus. ⁶[I pray] that the fellowship arising from your faith may succeed in producing a deep understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷For I have had much joy and comfort on account of your love because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.**

1. The pronouns "you/your" here are singular, which makes clear that the direct addressee is Philemon.

2. When Paul mentions Philemon in his prayers, he always thanks God for him. And the reason he always thanks God for Philemon is that people have told him of Philemon's love for all the saints and his faith in the Lord Jesus. Paul taught this man the truth about Jesus, and years later he's hearing how Philemon is honoring the Lord in his faith and service. That will cause you to give thanks!

3. Paul prays that the fellowship generated by Philemon's faith, that the bond he shares with all of like faith, will deepen his understanding of everything Christ has given us. As James Dunn remarks, "The thought is of the shared experience of faith as a dynamic relation with the Lord Jesus which constantly fed their understanding and consciousness, making them aware of how much they were benefiting as a result."

4. Paul's prayers for Philemon are built on the fact Philemon loved the saints such that he refreshed their hearts, made a difference in their lives, and that gave Paul much joy and comfort or encouragement. N. T. Wright says, "The Colossian Christians, weary in their daily battles for the Lord, find in Philemon the refreshment and rest needed to regain strength for renewed warfare."

C. Body (8-20)

1. Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8-11): **⁸Therefore, although I have enough boldness in Christ to command you to do the appropriate thing, ⁹on account of love I am appealing to you instead. Although I am none other than Paul, an ambassador of Christ Jesus and now also his prisoner, ¹⁰I appeal to you concerning my child, whom I begot while in chains - Onesimus. ¹¹He once was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.**

a. As an apostle, Paul could have "ordered" his dear friend to do what he wanted, but he prefers that Philemon not feel constrained so that he can act out of love.

b. Onesimus became Paul's child in that Paul led him to Christ. Playing off his name, Paul says that Onesimus, who formerly did not live up to his name (was useless instead of useful), now will do so because of his conversion to Christ.

c. Do you see the power in that? Christ changes people. Conversion is not only a change in our standing before God; it's a change in our very being. A Christian is not the same person in a new situation; he's a new person in a new situation.

2. Tactfully makes his desires known (vv. 12-16): **¹²I am sending him, who is my heart, back to you. ¹³I was planning to keep him with me in order that he**

might serve me on your behalf while I am in chains for the gospel, ¹⁴but I did not want to do anything without your consent so that your good deed might not be compelled but freely chosen. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a little while, so that you might have him back eternally, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

a. Paul hints plainly that he wants Philemon to allow Onesimus to return and join in ministry with Paul. Onesimus is Paul's heart, and he was planning to keep him that he might serve on Philemon's behalf while Paul is in chains for the gospel, but he'd only do that with Philemon's consent. Implicit in this is the assumption that (a) Philemon would have wanted to help Paul while in prison, had not other duties made that impossible, and (b) Onesimus will serve nicely as Philemon's representative and hence substitute.

b. Paul also wants Philemon to be reconciled with Onesimus. Indeed, he wants him to go further and to treat Onesimus in accordance with his new status, to treat him as a brother and no longer as a slave. In other words, even if Onesimus returns to his duties as a slave, he can never again be merely a slave, a walking household device. See, Eph. 6:9 ("Masters . . . do not threaten [your slaves]"), Col. 4:1 ("Masters, provide your slaves what is right and fair"), and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (masters are "brothers").

c. Conversion to Christ is a new birth, and the bond between those who share in that birth transcends all of their differences. The social and emotional gulf that once separated Philemon and Onesimus as master and slave has been bridged by the cross of Christ. As Paul wrote years earlier in Gal. 3:26-28, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷for as many as were baptized into Christ, clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

d. Where these seeds of equality came to full flower, the very institution of slavery would no longer be slavery.

(1) Early Christians understood this. They not only demonstrated a radically different attitude toward slaves, dealing with them as they did freemen, but began the practice of freeing slaves one by one as they had opportunity. There are reports of early Christians releasing huge numbers of slaves, regarding which Philip Schaff comments in his *History of the Christian Church Vol. II*, 5th rev. ed. (p. 353):

These legendary traditions may indeed be doubted as to the exact facts of the case, and probably are greatly exaggerated; but they are nevertheless conclusive as the exponents of the spirit which animated the church at that time concerning the duty of Christian masters. It was felt that in a thoroughly Christianized society there can be no room for despotism on the one hand and slavery on the other.

(2) Chamberlain writes (p. 141):

In AD 315, only two years after the Edict of Milan the Christian emperor Constantine took the small step of criminalizing the act of stealing children for the purpose of bringing them up as slaves. Over the next few centuries, Christian bishops and councils called for the redemption and freeing of slaves, and Christian monks freed many themselves. The effects were stunning. By the twelfth century slaves in Europe were rare, and by the fourteenth century they were almost unknown on that continent, including in England.

(3) European slavery was revived by the British in the seventeenth century, followed by the Spanish and the Portuguese. The abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was led by Christians, people like William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Finney, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

e. But people often wonder why the N.T. writers didn't attack the institution of slavery directly. That's a bigger topic than I can address here, but let me just mention a few things.

(1) Slavery in the first century was a very different institution from slavery as it existed in early America.

(a) S. Scott Bartchy states in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:66-70 (paragraphs are not continuous in original):

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

Furthermore, by no means were those in slavery regularly to be found at the bottom of the social-economic pyramid. Rather, in that place were those free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any certainty of finding it (day laborers), some of whom eventually sold themselves into slavery to gain some job security.

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, e.g., to pay debts, to climb socially (Roman citizenship was conventionally

bestowed on a slave released by a Roman owner), to obtain special jobs, and above all to enter a life that was more secure and less strenuous than existence as a poor, freeborn person.

Slaves were used for "an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances," some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible: "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains."

(b) Andrew Lincoln writes in his commentary (WBC) on Ephesians (p. 418):

Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Contrary to the supposition that everyone was trying to avoid slavery at all costs, it is clear that some people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, to obtain particular employment open only to slaves, and to enjoy a better standard of living than they had experienced as free persons. Being a slave had the benefit of providing a certain personal and social security.

(2) The fact God did not forbid Christians in the first century from owning slaves but rather tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean that was his ideal for mankind.

(a) His ideal is brotherhood and equality, but it is possible that the world had gotten so twisted that he was willing to tolerate less than his ideal as a concession to the hardness of men's hearts, similar to what he did, through Moses, in permitting divorce (see Mat. 19:3-9).

(b) Or maybe he tolerated it because mandating the release of slaves in that social context would have caused anarchy and consequent suffering as the gospel exploded across the Roman world. In other words, perhaps the thorn of slavery needed to be removed slowly; perhaps society first needed to be altered under Christianity's influence to be able to handle such a change without overwhelming adverse side effects. James D. G. Dunn states (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 699):

[S]lavery was an established fact of life in the ancient world. As many as one-third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres were slaves. The economies of the ancient world could not have functioned without slavery. Consequently, a responsible challenge to the practice of slavery would have required a complete reworking of the economic system and a complete rethinking of social structures, which was scarcely thinkable at the time, except in idealistic or anarchic terms.

(3) In the context of this regulated form of first-century slavery that God tolerated, if release was desired it needed to be worked out on an individual

basis consistent with the principle of brotherhood. But as long as the relationship remained, the slave could not take advantage of having a brother for a master, and the master could not mistreat the slave.

(4) That God tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean he would tolerate that same form of slavery under different social conditions or tolerate other forms of slavery, such as the slavery that existed in early America. So the attempts by some in early America to support slavery from the Bible were misguided.

f. Paul suggests that Onesimus's flight may have been in fulfillment of a larger divine purpose, namely that Onesimus find Christ, with the result that Philemon might have him back not just for this life but eternally as a brother in Christ. That puts the wrong done to Philemon in a different context.

3. Repeated request and promise to repay (vv. 17-20): **¹⁷So then, if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸And if he wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to my account. ¹⁹(I Paul write this with my own hand; I will repay it.) Not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰Yes, brother, may I have benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.**

a. Paul appeals to his bond with Philemon in asking him to welcome Onesimus in the same way he would welcome Paul. As Onesimus had stood in for Philemon in helping Paul in prison, so now let him stand in for Paul in going to Philemon.

b. If Onesimus had absconded with any of Philemon's money, Paul tells Philemon to put it on his tab. And speaking of debts, Paul reminds Philemon that he was the one who saved Philemon's life in teaching him the truth about Christ.

c. As Philemon has refreshed the hearts of others (v. 7), Paul asks him to do the same for him by acceding to his desire to have Onesimus work with him in his ministry (and/or by acceding to his request to receive Onesimus with joy).

D. Closing (21-25)

1. Expression of confidence and plans to visit (vv. 21-22): **²¹Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²²At the same time, prepare for me a guest room for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.**

a. Paul expresses his confidence in Philemon's heartfelt response to Paul's call of love. And he says he knows that he will do "even more than I say." This perhaps is a hint that Paul would like Philemon not only to send Onesimus back to him but also to give him his freedom. Then again, it may mean that Paul is confident Philemon will send Onesimus back to him in addition to welcoming him warmly. It

depends on whether what Paul "said" includes the strong hint he gave about returning Onesimus or is limited to his express request to welcome Onesimus.

b. Paul asks him to prepare a guest room, as he hopes soon to be there in response to the prayers of Philemon, his household, and no doubt the church that met there ("your" is plural).

2. Typical closing elements (vv. 23-25): ²³**Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,** ²⁴**and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers.** ²⁵**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**