

A Look at the Book of Philemon

It was probably written about the same time as Colossians and carried by the same messenger from Rome (Col. 4:9, 17 and Philemon 1-2)

It has much in common with 1 Peter.

The situation

- Paul is in prison in Rome.
- He is contacted by a runaway slave, Onesimus, and leads him to the Lord Jesus.
- Did Onesimus seek Paul out having previously met him in the home of his master Philemon?
- Having disciplined Onesimus, Paul sends him back to his legal master.
- Imagine the total shock on Philemon's face to see Onesimus back home with a letter from Paul in his hand!
- Paul feels that it is Onesimus' duty as a believer in the Lord Jesus to return to his owner.
- Paul makes a formal offer personally to pay Philemon for any loss incurred as a result of Onesimus flight.
- Clearly Paul says that the slave-master relationship could no longer continue now that Onesimus was a brother and has been serving the cause of the Gospel together with Paul in Rome.
- Why didn't Paul condemn slavery as did William Wilberforce?

Why did Paul accept "slavery" (see also 1 Tim. 6:1-2 and more generally the endorsement of "the powers that be"? (Rom. 13:1-7)

- It appears that the social order is being reaffirmed. Is this right?
- It was this attitude that led the German Lutheran Church to accept the Third Reich in the 1930s.
- So what should be our attitude to all sorts of social issues today and especially where we are involved in social action anywhere in the world? Philemon is a test case of whether or not we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, should affirm the current social order.

The Opening Greeting (v. 1-3)

The letter is addressed to Philemon but also to the whole church of which he was a member and the leader.

The final greeting is to "you" plural. The letter would be read to the whole church – probably in Philemon's home – with all present including Onesimus. So Philemon would have to make his response in the context of public worship.

Paul's Situation: he calls himself a prisoner. He refers to his prison status in v. 9, 10 and 13. There is probably a double meaning. "**A prisoner of Christ Jesus**" has the sense of both 'imprisoned for Jesus' and 'imprisoned by Jesus'. His outward presence in prison was for the sake of the Gospel, but this was also a symbol of his inner bondage to the Gospel (v. 13).

Verse 13 is interesting. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him so he could serve Paul on the behalf of Philemon for Philemon is "**a fellow worker**" (v. 24). Paul gently reminds him that he owes Paul his "very self". Perhaps I am being unfair to Philemon. I imagine he was a very wealthy man – a landowner with several household slaves and a house large enough to host his church. Is this a hint that his comfortable lifestyle has Paul fearing that he has been lulled into complacency?

The Foundation of Paul's Appeal (v. 4-7)

There are two themes: **faith** and **love** v. 5, 6 and 7.

Paul thanks God for the measure of faith Philemon has towards the Lord Jesus as well as his love for all the believers and in verse 7 he says how encouraged he is by all the love and faith demonstrated.

Verse 6 is a “stop and think” verse: ***“My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deep understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ.”***

Different versions of the New Testament have slightly different translations. Here is one that is understandable: ***“I pray that the corporate dimension of your faith – the fellowship which your faith creates – may become active, inspired by a full awareness of all the good that is given to us and demanded of us in order to bring us to our goal which is Christ Himself.”***

If this is so, Philemon's faith had sort of gone to sleep particularly in regard to its corporate outworking – the link between faith and love – the good done to us and demanded of us by the Lord Jesus. That is the heart of Paul's prayer. It is a prayer that Philemon will be led to think in a new and clearer way about his faith.

All this is to prepare Philemon for the shock of v. 10! ***“I appeal to you for my child Onesimus”*** So the issue for Philemon is that the reality of the faith and love we have for the Lord Jesus binds us to each other as well as to the Lord Jesus. He shows Philemon that he has a wonderful opportunity to put this into practice. So Paul makes his appeal (v. 8-12).

The very surprising thing about the appeal (v. 8-12)

Paul doesn't tell Philemon what to do concerning Onesimus! He says a lot:

- He doesn't intend to use his apostolic authority to tell him what to do, but instead reminds him of the love of the Lord Jesus.
- He reminds Philemon that he too is a prisoner of Christ Jesus.
- He tells Philemon that Onesimus' conversion means that he can now live up to his name which means 'useful'. He had been useful for Paul and now he could be useful to Philemon (v. 11).
- He calls Onesimus ***“my very own heart”*** which is a very vivid way of showing what the “fellowship of faith” is really all about in practice. We are bound to one another.
- But the big surprise is that he never tells Philemon what he wants him to do! Forgiveness is the constant duty of a believer, to be exercised in every circumstance. But clearly Paul wants Philemon to work out for himself what he should do to/for Onesimus. And this doesn't come from fiat (authority), but by careful personal reflection. Philemon has to work out for himself what ***“is required”*** (v. 8).

Paul gives three reasons for sending Onesimus (v. 13-17)

The Old Testament (Deut. 23:15) forbids the return of runaway slaves. This is part of the humanitarian laws of the Old Testament in contrast with the standard practice of execution. It made Israel a refuge for the poor and the outcast. But Paul, the ex-'strict Pharisee', is not following the law. So he gives three reasons for not following the Old Testament law:

Reason One: for the sake of Philemon's freedom as a believer (v. 13-14)

If Paul had simply done what he wanted and kept Onesimus with him in Rome for work, since he was ***“imprisoned in Rome for the Gospel”***, then Philemon's hand would have been forced. If Paul had said, 'accept him as a fellow worker' – again it would have been a question of a fait accompli. He wanted Philemon's choice to be unforced. The same word “goodness” in verse 14 is used in verse 6 (translated 'good thing' in my translation) and clearly Paul wants Philemon, in this situation, to be aware of this “goodness” by himself so that it will prompt him to put “fellowship” into proper practice.

Reason Two: because of Philemon's legitimate claim on Onesimus (v. 15-16)

The principle is that Onesimus' conversion did not abolish his status as a slave or Philemon as his master. The legal punishment of captured runaway slaves was death by crucifixion. The Romans were very afraid that what happened in the Spartacus incident (nearly 100 years before) would destroy their empire.

But Onesimus was now related to Philemon "both in the flesh and in the Lord" – i.e. he is still Philemon's slave but he is also his "brother in Christ" (v. 16). Neither status denies the other. So even as a brother, Philemon may still exercise all the rights of the slave owner.

This is amazing! For the law gave Onesimus no protection at all. If a slave owner chose to kill a runaway slave, the law would not even blink. A slave had no rights and no property – not even his family belonged to him. In Ephesians (6:9) Paul speaks strongly against the harsh mistreatment of slaves, but he never says the whole slavery system is wrong.

In the Old Testament (Ex. 21:5-6) provision is made for a slave who wishes to stay with his master when legally he should be released after the seventh year of slavery:

"If the slave declares, 'I love my master and I do not want to go free', then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door ... and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his slave for life."

So Paul uses the ***"for ever"*** (v. 15) deliberately to remind Philemon of this passage. Onesimus is in the same position as the Old Testament slave who says. ***"I love my master"***, because now he is not just a slave but also a ***"beloved brother"***. In v. 15 Paul sees God's purpose behind Onesimus' flight. Philemon can receive back with warmth and love a slave from whom he can never be separated again – not even in eternity!

Reason Three: because of the bond that now exists between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus (v. 17)

Paul meant it when he said of Onesimus that he was ***"sending my very heart"*** (v. 12). So if Paul's great relationship with Philemon was to remain unbroken, there must be reconciliation. If Philemon were to punish Onesimus, it would be the equivalent of punishing Paul. Hence Paul's plea, ***"if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."***

In Greek, "partner" is "koinonos" and it is related to "koinonia" (fellowship). So Paul's argument is, 'if you feel yourself bound to me by the faith in which we share ... and our mutual responsibility to love one another ... because of the Lord Jesus, then receive Onesimus in the same spirit'.

Paying and Owning (v. 18-20)

This is the climax of the letter! Paul is committed to "the fellowship in Christ" principle and so he makes a signed declaration that he will pay back anything Onesimus owes to Philemon (v. 18-19a). I like the "if" in v. 18. Clearly Onesimus had wronged Philemon and with Onesimus gone, he may have incurred expenses in employing other workers or buying another slave to do what Onesimus had abandoned.

So Paul allows Philemon the full right to exact his due under the law, as one wronged. But then he qualifies this permission to ask the payments due to him, "But just remember Philemon, if you are tempted to demand what is due, that I do not intend to exact from you all that you owe me – your life itself! But wait, I do want something from you, brother, something 'useful'!"

Clearly Paul is back to his play on the word Onesimus (useful). If I were Philemon and received this letter, I would scratch my head and ask, 'Is Paul asking me to send Onesimus back to him or not? Does he want me to set him free? Would Paul be happy if I just forgave him and took him back?'

This is the beauty of this letter. It is a very moving appeal, but Paul never reveals what he wants to happen! One reason for this 'uncertainty' is quite clear – Philemon has to make up his own mind about what is ***"required"*** (v. 8). He has to come to his own awareness of the good that is demanded of him

“for the sake of Christ” (v. 6) and how he can benefit Paul **“in the Lord”** (v. 20). And to make it even more difficult, he has to do all this in the context of the church gathered together in his living room. His house is a house of prayer and the church is gathered there for worship. What did he decide to do? I wish I could have been ‘a fly on the wall’. In fact we don't know what happened!

Final Encouragement and Greetings (v. 21-25)

Verse 21 is very loaded! Paul has not issued any instructions, so “your obedience” must be “your obedience to the Lord Jesus”. All Paul asked of Philemon was to **receive** Onesimus (v. 17). So what is **“knowing that you will do even more than I say”** (v. 21)? This was Philemon's dilemma and it is ours as well.

Personally, I think Paul (and I myself) would be **very** disappointed if Philemon had **just** received Onesimus and even more so if Philemon had taken him up on his offer of compensation. If I was Philemon, I would have been horrified at the request of verse 22 (**“prepare a guest room for me”**). I would have thought, ‘Help! Paul is coming to check up on me in response to his request!’ I would have suspected that in Paul's request there was more than meets the eye. Where is Onesimus to sleep? Having just been asked to receive Onesimus as if he was Paul himself, Philemon has little choice! He can't send Onesimus to the old slave quarters! He must put him in a comfortable bedroom prepared for “fellow workers”.

Not surprisingly there are different ways of interpreting this letter:

Luther's view: as believers we must affirm the social order and respect the rights of the laws of political authority. In this case, this is a wonderful letter about the kindness of Paul to a wretched slave in great need **as well as** about the upholding of current law.

An alternative view: the movement for the emancipation of slaves (Wilberforce and others) found great inspiration in this letter. Did Paul want freedom from slavery for Onesimus? He never says so. In the New Testament slavery is never attacked as such, but the principles it inculcates, if worked out, will kill the institution of slavery.

So why does Paul impose this restraint on himself? If we can answer this, we can perhaps discover something useful for our situation. There are various approaches:

- We could look for a pastoral answer.
- We could find an answer in a ‘spiritualised’ Gospel message.
- Are responses to these sorts of issues genuinely relative?
- Perhaps this sort of decision is torn between the two ‘ages’ in which we live – the 1st century and the 21st-century.

A pastoral answer

Perhaps Paul refused to lay down the principle that all slaves, like Onesimus, should be freed by believing slave owners. Why not? Two possible reasons:

- Because Philemon needed the spiritual challenge of working it out for himself.
- Because Paul was afraid that Christians would get the reputation of a political and social movement. It would have made a huge difference in the 1st century A.D. if it was known that part of our ‘creed’ was the abolition of slavery. It was explosive in other ways and it was a less essential part of the Gospel. So Paul leaves Philemon to make up his own mind. No hints are dropped in this case. It is a pastoral issue that can be generalised.

Should we just “spiritualise” the Gospel?

In other words, the Gospel has nothing to say on the level of secondary ethics. The primary level is our basic level of our walk with God, our own personal holiness and the basics of ethical interpersonal

relationships. This argument is that Paul has nothing to say about broad social issues such as slavery. He is just concerned with the reconciliation between two estranged believers for their own common good.

Yet it seems to me that there are hints of “something more”! If Paul was arguing for straightforward forgiveness he might have said, **“Forgiving one another as God, in Christ, has forgiven you.”** (Eph. 4:32). But forgiveness would merely mean the restoration of Onesimus to his former position of a slave, perhaps accompanied by a probationary period so that Philemon wouldn't sell him for 6 months. If he didn't behave respectfully he would sell him after 6 months. I think Paul wanted much more than this!

Are responses of this sort of issue genuinely relative to time and culture?

We can argue that in different areas we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, may genuinely differ without having to conclude that the other party is misunderstanding the implications of the Gospel. We know that as believers, we **must** live godly lives, but as believers, we may keep our slaves or we may release them. We may be Tories or we may support the left-wing of the Labour Party. We may be capitalists or socialists. We each have the responsibility before God to make our decisions in brotherly discussion with other believers who feel differently. In other words, Paul is saying to Philemon, ‘make up your own mind’! But this approach doesn't work! For one thing, why does Paul not say this? Can we believe that everything would have been restored in Paul's relationship with Philemon's decision if he had taken Onesimus back but kept him as a slave as before and also taken up Paul's offer of compensation? Would Paul have thought that this was the best response? I don't think so!

Perhaps this sort of decision is torn between the two ages in which we live.

We have been accused of:

- **World-affirming** – supporting the status quo come what may
- **World-denying** – and so we are down on arts, down on sex, down on almost all “fun” and in the hereafter we will receive a reward for the present injustice.

This sort of happened in the USA. In the “deep South” there were Christian slave owners who found support for what they were doing as “God ordered” and they trusted that their slaves trusted the same God for justice in the world to come! This is the dilemma we meet in Philemon.

It arises because the world is both:

- ▲ **created** and therefore good
- ▲ **fallen** and therefore redeemable through the Lord Jesus

So Philemon must relate to Onesimus on two levels:

“in the flesh” as slave and master

“in the Lord” as brothers in Christ

And both these conditions exist side-by-side at the moment because the Kingdom of God has broken into our world, but has not yet displaced the **“kingdoms of this world”**.

So Paul appears to think in two apparently contradictory ways about the world. First he sees the secular authority as a servant of God wielding the sword on God's behalf (Rom. 13:1-7). On the other hand, he sees secular forces as under the control of the **“principalities and powers”** – of **“the rulers of this age”** who instigated the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor. 2:8; Eph. 6:12 etc.) Paul looks forward with great anticipation to the moment when the transformation from the old to the new will be complete (Rom. 8:18 ff). He urges us to conduct ourselves now, in the hour before dawn, as if we were already in the new era and were now clad in the **“armour of light”** (Rom. 13:12 ff).

All this is easy to **understand**, but very hard to carry out when it is a matter of living **now** in the **holiness** of heaven. But what about the **structures** of heaven? Paul declares that **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Gal. 4:28). From the perspective of the **New Age** this is true, but we are still in the Old Age – at least in the continuing existence of the basic sexual distinction between men and women which is not only inevitable but

also desirable. It is part of the creativeness of the old order and however much it is destined to pass away in the New Age, we thank God for it now!

What then of the, *“neither slave nor free”*? Should Philemon have the same attitude to slavery as we do to marriage, thanking God for slavery and prizing it, aware that it will pass away when the new heavens and the new earth are formed after the return of the Lord Jesus?

Or should he seek to bring the New Age to as full an expression as possible here in the midst of the ‘Old’, by repudiating all that has been abolished in the Lord Jesus? This is our dilemma as well as Philemon’s! Paul doesn’t answer it fully. He tells the church in Rome that the wicked Emperor Nero is a power *“instituted by God...God’s servant to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”* (Rom. 13:1, 4).

The only solution to this is to believe that the New Age is bursting in on the Old Age by the power of the Holy Spirit, displacing as it does so, not only its wickedness, but also **some** of its structures which may be good in themselves, but which sin has used to bolster its power.

So Philemon must make up his mind and heart to determine which way the Holy Spirit is pointing in his case. Paul simply offers him one principle to guide his decision: whether the Old Age is being allowed to stay or is it to be swallowed up by the New Age? **But either way, every opportunity must be taken to further the Gospel of the Lord Jesus and show forth His love.** I think this is the implication of v. 13. Because of the continuance of God’s ‘Old Order’ while this age lasts, Paul has to lose (give up) one of the heralds of the New Age (Onesimus) and to that extent the proclamation of the Gospel has been slowed.

What Philemon made of all this we will not know until we meet him one day in heaven! It will be fascinating to hear the results of Paul’s letter!

Well, these are just some conclusions of this fascinating letter. Whether we are born an “Onesimus” or a “Philemon”, the secret we can find as a disciple of the Lord Jesus is complete spiritual freedom!