

## Introduction

### I. WRITER

Of the four prison Epistles, this is the only one written directly to an individual. Pauline authorship is self-evident through the repetition of his name (1, 9, 19). The listed associates were with Paul during his Roman confinement (1, 23-24). He identified himself twice as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (1, 9) and as the "aged" (9); both of these appellatives would fit into Paul's life history at this time. Its similarity to Colossians (1-2, 23-24; cf. Col. 4:10-17) argues for a simultaneous writing from the same place by the same author.

### II. TIME AND PLACE

Onesimus (10), a slave of Philemon who lived in Colosse, had stolen some of his master's goods and fled to Rome (18-19). In the imperial city Onesimus somehow came into contact with Paul, who led the slave into a saving knowledge of Christ during the apostle's captivity (10). For a while Onesimus stayed in Rome and ministered to Paul's material needs, perhaps as a house servant or chef (11, 13). Paul, however, knew that the slave had to be returned to his legal master (13-14). Since Tychicus was returning to the province of Asia with the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians (Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8), Paul decided to send Onesimus back to Philemon with his messenger. The letter was thus

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composed to explain the situation to Philemon and to instruct the master as to how the runaway slave, now a Christian, should be received. This personal letter, then, was written from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment (A.D. 60).

Some current thinkers believe that the book was actually sent to Archippus, the real owner of Onesimus. To them, Philemon was the general overseer of the Christian work in Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse, with his residence in Colosse. Paul sent the letter and the slave first to Philemon, who in turn brought them to Archippus. It was planned that Philemon would exert pressure on Archippus so he would comply with Paul's request. In so doing, these people equate the Epistle to Philemon with the "epistle from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16). Also, the fulfillment of Archippus' ministry would be in the release of Onesimus (Col. 4:17). Although this novel approach appears plausible in places, it has not received acceptance by evangelical scholars. Since Philemon was mentioned first, the book must have been written to him. If it had been written to Archippus, the text would have read "to the church in his house" rather than "your house." Also, the simple explanation of Archippus' ministry is the general ministry (perhaps the pastorate), not a specific task (to set a designated slave free).

### III. PURPOSES

In this intimate letter Paul wrote to commend Philemon for his Christian compassion toward the needs of fellow believers (1-7); to effect the forgiveness and restoration of Onesimus by Philemon (8-21); to announce plans of a future visit, based on his hopes of an imminent release (22); and to send greetings from many of Paul's associates who were probably known to Philemon (23-25).

### IV. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The finest human illustration of the theological concepts of forgiveness and imputation permeates this book. Paul earlier wrote: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph.

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4:32). Human forgiveness should reflect divine forgiveness. To the spiritually sensitive, the personages of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus symbolize respectively Christ, the Father, and the converted sinner. When Paul besought Philemon to receive the slave forever as Paul himself (12, 15, 17), the truth that God accepts believing sinners in the beloved one, Christ, takes on flesh. Paul also wrote: "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account . . . I will repay it" (17, 18). This is the language of imputation (cf. II Cor. 5:19-21). The debt of the sinner (sin, guilt, and penalty) was paid by Christ's redemptive death. The person who paid the debt is also the one in whom the believer finds an acceptable standing.

Although the Bible nowhere directly attacks the institution of human slavery, principles for the humane treatment of slaves are found everywhere (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; I Tim. 6:1-2; I Peter 2:18-25). Slaves were to be treated as people, not as property. In this personal letter, however, this is a hint of a principle which would lead a Christian master to release his slaves, especially those who were Christian. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus "not now as a servant [slave], but above a servant, a brother beloved" (16). He later added: "Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say" (21). The words "more than I say" provide the clue. Do they not contain Paul's hope and prayer that Philemon would not only forgive Onesimus, but that he would also release Onesimus from the yoke of human bondage? The principle is clear: If God our heavenly master freed us who were slaves to sin, should we not also release men from human slavery if it is within our power to do so?

## The Approach to Philemon

Philemon 1-9

One of the Beatitudes states: "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9). In his attempt to effect a reconciliation of loving brotherhood between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul personified that biblical principle. The difficulty behind his task was real and significant, caused by the geographical barrier and the cultural disparity. God, however, used Paul's diplomatic epistle to eliminate both problems.

### I. GREETINGS (1-3)

This brief letter contains the distinctive marks of a Pauline epistle: name, position, associate, readers, and blessing.

#### A. Author (1a)

All of Paul's letters begin with the mention of his name. His life was discussed earlier (Col. 1:1).

##### 1. His position

Paul identified himself in two ways. *First*, he was a "prisoner." This is the only epistle which has this opening description. This title would no doubt appeal to Philemon's sentiment and would fit in with Paul's approach to his friend. He planned to make a request rather than to issue a command.

*Second*, Paul was a prisoner "of Jesus Christ." He was no ordi-

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nary prisoner. This fact soon became evident to those authorities who were involved in his case. Elsewhere he wrote: "So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places" (Phil. 1:13). It was soon known that the apostle was before the Roman court because he was a Christian, not because he had committed a civil crime. Paul himself knew that he was there by the will of God. The government officials may have thought that he was their prisoner, but he recognized that he really was "the prisoner of the Lord" (Eph. 4:1). He was a spiritual, heaven-sent "ambassador in bonds" (Eph. 6:20). Thus, the apostle was in Rome as a witness, not as a defendant. He asked his friends to pray for this unique opportunity of outreach (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:3-4).

#### His associate

Timothy, whose life was also discussed earlier, was with Paul at Rome. He is called, literally, "the brother" (*ho adelphos*; cf. Col. 1:1). The term comes from two Greek words (*apo* and *delphus*) which mean "from the same womb." Timothy was a brother not only to Paul, but also to Philemon. All three men had been born of God and therefore shared in the same divine nature. The relationship that Timothy sustained to the other two was the same relationship that Paul wanted Philemon to manifest toward Onesimus (16). This descriptive title was used therefore with deliberate intent.

#### B. Recipients (1b-2)

Lightfoot said that "the letter introduces us to an ordinary household in a small town in Phrygia. Four members of it are mentioned by name, the father, the mother, the son, and the slave."<sup>1</sup>

##### 1. Philemon (1b)

As the head of the household, Philemon is naturally addressed first. This is the only New Testament book in which his name is

<sup>1</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 303.

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found. He knew Paul personally and was without doubt converted through the apostle's ministry, possibly during Paul's lengthy stay at Ephesus (19; cf. Acts 19). Elsewhere in the epistle, Paul directly addresses him as "brother" (7, 20).

Philemon is described here in two ways. *First*, his relationship to Paul and Timothy was as "our dearly beloved." They all shared a reciprocal love. This affectionate word is later used of Onesimus (16). Paul wanted Philemon to love his slave in the same way that the apostle loved Philemon.

*Second*, Philemon's position was that of "fellowlabourer." Paul and Philemon were joint workers in the cause of Christ. In the past they perhaps worked together in Ephesus or some other city in Asia; however, this may just be a general statement. As Paul labored in Rome and Philemon labored in Colosse, they became fellow laborers for the glory of the Savior.

### 2. Apphia (2a)

Lightfoot believes it is a "safe inference" to say that Apphia was Philemon's wife.<sup>2</sup> This is the only place that her name appears in the New Testament.

Apphia also was "beloved" (*tēi agapētēi*).<sup>3</sup> She was a beloved sister to Paul in the family of God. The instructions given to Philemon about the proper treatment of Onesimus would likewise apply to her treatment of Onesimus.

### 3. Archippus (2b)

His name means "horse ruler." If one accepts that Apphia was Philemon's wife, then it logically follows that Archippus was their son. His name appears twice in the New Testament (2; Col. 4:17). He was in the gospel ministry in Colosse or Laodicea, probably the latter. Since the two cities were near each other, Lightfoot concluded: "Archippus must have been in constant communication with his parents, who lived there; and it was therefore quite natural that, writing to the father and mother, St. Paul should

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>3</sup>The critical Greek text substitutes "sister" for "beloved."

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mention the son's name also in the opening address, though he was not on the spot."<sup>4</sup>

Paul identified Archippus as "our fellowsoldier." This complementary term is used elsewhere only of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25). This general title describes their common struggle as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (II Tim. 2:3). They became acquainted at Ephesus, and may also have been spiritual comrades in arms there.

### 4. The local church (2c)

The word "church" (*ekklēsiā*) is formed from two words which mean "to call out from." A church, therefore, is a called-out group of believers. The term can refer to the universal church, that group of believers which has been divinely called out of a sinful world into Christ in this present age between the descent of the Holy Spirit and the translation of the church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23). Usually, the term refers to the local church, the group of believers assembled together in one place for the worship of God and the observance of Christ's ordinances and commands. This latter usage is intended here.

This assembly met in the house of Philemon ("thy"). This was common. Other "house churches" are mentioned elsewhere (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). Private church buildings were constructed much later in the history of the church. Most believers were poor freemen or slaves. Therefore they probably did not own property—certainly not buildings that could accommodate a large gathering. Since Philemon did own such a house, he must have been both wealthy and hospitable. Such kindness now needed to be demonstrated toward Onesimus.

## C. Blessing (3)

### 1. Its content

*First*, "grace" (*charis*) is divine favor without regard to merit or repayment. It does not mean that the recipient of the grace is unworthy, only that the basis of giving is without regard to human

<sup>4</sup>Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles*, p. 309.



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merit. Every blessing of life, whether physical or spiritual, is a direct result of divine grace. This reference is to that grace which God gives every day to sustain His own (John 1:16).

*Second*, "peace" (*eirēnē*) appears next, and rightly so. Unless there is a manifestation of grace, there can be no peace. When believers are regenerated, they have positional peace before God (Rom. 5:1). The reference here is to that practical peace which protects the child of God from nervous and mental disorders (Phil. 4:7). The believer can enjoy this provision every day if he claims it by faith.

### 2. Its recipients

The change from the singular in verse 2 (*sou*) to the plural "you" (*humin*) shows that Paul wanted Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church to share in the blessing from God. It was not intended for just one person, Philemon, but for all.

### 3. Its source

There is a double source of the blessing.<sup>5</sup> *First*, it originates from "God our Father." He is God; He is the Father; and believers are related to Him ("our"). He is not the Father of unsaved humanity, but He becomes the Father of a repentant sinner at the time of his conversion. He is not the Father of a believer in the same sense as the Father-Son relationship within the trinitarian oneness of the divine Being. The former begins in time; the latter has always existed.

*Second*, the blessing also stems from "the Lord Jesus Christ." He who is one with the Father gives to the Christian daily grace and peace as the believer permits the gracious Prince of Peace to live His life through him.

## II. THANKSGIVING (4-7)

Paul thanked God for people as well as for things. His thanksgiving was both personal and constant ("I thank"),<sup>6</sup> but later he

<sup>5</sup> Indicated by the single preposition "from" (*apo*) and a double object.

<sup>6</sup> Present active indicative, first person singular.

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expressed joy for both Timothy and himself ("we have," 7). The concept of thanksgiving is derived from two words: "well" (*eu*) and "grace" (*charis*). When God graciously gives favors to a believer, the Christian does well to respond with thanks.

### A. Its Fact (4)

#### 1. Its object

Every good and perfect gift descends from God (James 1:17); therefore, thanks should ultimately be given to Him. As a believer-priest, Paul was able to communicate with God by offering the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15). The personal pronoun "my" shows the intimacy of relationship between the Christian and his creator.

#### 2. Its time

The adverb "always" (*pantote*) grammatically can modify either the main verb ("thank") or the following participle ("making").<sup>7</sup> Paul did not remember Philemon every time he prayed, but when the apostle did mention his friend's name, he always gave thanks for the master of Onesimus.

#### 3. Its occasion

The occasion for thanksgiving is seen in the participial phrase ("making mention of thee in my prayers"). Paul believed in both the sovereign purposes of God and the personal responsibility of private prayer. Philemon probably was thrilled and impressed to read that the busy apostle took time to pray for him and even to give thanks for him. Paul was an intercessor. He believed that God would work in the lives of others as a direct result of his concern.

### B. Its Cause (5)

Paul heard a report which caused him to give thanks.<sup>8</sup> How did

<sup>7</sup> Both Kent and Robertson relate it to the former.

<sup>8</sup> Causal usage of the participle ("hearing").

he receive this information? Since Epaphras told about the faith and love of the Colossian believers (Col. 1:4, 8), it is very likely that he informed Paul about the spiritual outreach of Philemon. Two areas of special commendation formed the basis for the apostle's gratitude.

## 1. The love of Philemon

The love of Philemon ("thy love") is isolated here for special mention. Although Apphia and Archippus are not specifically included in this reference, they undoubtedly assisted Philemon in his gracious acts of hospitality. His love (*agapēn*) was a manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). This love is the highest type, based on a recognition of value or worth in the object.

Philemon's love was directed "toward all saints." He saw value in all of the saints because both they and he were members of the family of God. Believers "are taught of God to love one another" (I Thess. 4:9), an evidence of genuine salvation (I John 3:14). Philemon was not partial; he manifested his love to *all* the saints: the men and the women; the Jews and the Gentiles; and the freemen and the slaves. Now Paul wanted Philemon to include one more believer in that group, namely, Onesimus.

## 2. The faith of Philemon

Paul did not refer to Philemon's initial saving faith, but rather to his daily, practical faith which the Christian should exercise as he walks by faith.<sup>9</sup> This faith was Philemon's daily possession ("thou hast").<sup>10</sup> Faith is simply that conviction of heart and mind which leads a person to commit himself to Christ completely, first for salvation, then for daily spiritual sustenance.

Faith must have an object. The value of faith depends on the value of the object. Philemon's faith was true and valid because it was directed "toward the Lord Jesus," the true and faithful one.

There is a slight grammatical problem in this verse. What is the relationship of the two nouns ("love" and "faith") to the two

<sup>9</sup>This faith is definite, indicated by the article (*tēn pistin*).  
<sup>10</sup>Present active indicative; *echeis*.

prepositional phrases? Lightfoot observed: "The logical order is violated, and the clauses are inverted in the second part of the sentence, thus producing an example of the figure called chiasm."<sup>11</sup> Chiasm follows the literary procedure of 1-4:2-3. The first (love) and fourth (saints) concepts go together, whereas the second (faith) and third (Lord) are joined. Elsewhere, love is manward and faith is Godward (Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4) If "faith" means "faithfulness" in this context, then love and faithfulness could have been extended to both the Lord and the saints.

## C. Its Purpose (6)

The connective "that" (*hopōs*) shows the purpose for the intercessory prayer of thanksgiving (4).

### 1. Effective fellowship

Paul prayed "that the communication of thy faith may become effectual." The word "communication" (*koinōnia*) normally is translated as "fellowship" (I John 1:3, 6-7). It is that which is shared, that which is commonly possessed. The fellowship of Philemon's faith may simply point to the common life which he shared with other believers, but it seems to imply something more in this context. In the past, Philemon had shared his material goods with needy Christians (7). He brought physical relief through his acts of brotherly love.

Now, Paul wanted Philemon to share the practical expression of his faith in a new experience. He wanted Philemon's faith to "become effectual" through the kind reception of Onesimus and the subsequent release of the Christian slave.

### 2. Total knowledge

The sphere of effective fellowship is in "the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."<sup>12</sup> The reading of this epistle would give Philemon such understanding. His acts

<sup>11</sup>Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles*, p. 334.

<sup>12</sup>The preposition "by" is actually "in" (*en*).

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of Christian charity were to find total expression in all human situations involving members of the family of God ("every good thing").

This goodness (*agathou*), which corresponded to the character of God, was found only in believers ("in you").<sup>13</sup> It was in Philemon and his family, and it dwelled within Paul and his associate.

Carson wrote: "But at once [Paul] corrects any idea that such blessings are for the believer's personal enjoyment. He speaks rather in terms of blessings which have Christ as their goal."<sup>14</sup> All displays of brotherly love must literally be done "unto [*eis*] Christ Jesus," for His honor and glory; otherwise, they are mere humanistic manifestations of philanthropy. Christ said to believers who fed and clothed the hungry and the naked: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). That principle applies to all interpersonal relationships within the family of God.

### D. Its Reason (7)

The explanatory connective "for" (*gar*) goes back to the main verb ("I thank"). Paul gave thanks, for he had much joy and comfort.

#### 1. Presence of joy and comfort

Paul and Timothy were both pleased by the kindness of Philemon ("we have").<sup>15</sup> It brought them "joy and consolation." The former emotion looks back at what had been done, and the latter provides encouragement in the present and for the future. Paul received comfort in his own imprisonment, and the generosity of Philemon encouraged the apostle to send this epistle of intercession for Onesimus. In fact, he literally had "much" (*pollēn*) emotional strength.

The basis of this joy and comfort was the love of Philemon ("in

<sup>13</sup>The critical Greek text has "in us."

<sup>14</sup>Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup>The critical Greek text has *eschon* ("I had") rather than *echomen* ("we have"). Regardless, Timothy shared in Paul's joy.

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thy love"). Literally, it reads "upon (*epi*) your love." Paul heard about this love from the Colossian representative (5).

### 2. Relief of the saints

The connective "because" (*hoti*) gives the cause for this joy and comfort. Paul rejoiced "because the bowels of the saints are refreshed." The unusual descriptive term "bowels" (*splagchna*) refers to the deep, inner emotional needs of a person (see the discussion about Colossians 3:12b in chapter 9). Paul thanked God because the physical and emotional needs of his fellow believers had been satisfied. The verb stresses both the initial act of hospitality and the subsequent state of personal satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Paul advised: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). A spiritual Christian will be involved in "distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality" (Rom. 12:13). Believers must be altruistic and humanitarian in their living, or else their profession of faith will be vain (James 2:14-17).

Paul's joy took an added significance because the saints had been refreshed through his friend Philemon ("by thee, brother"). Philemon was the agent (*dia*) through whom God met the needs of His children. God works in and through the compassionate concern of involved believers to provide food, clothing, and shelter for His own (Matt. 6:25-34). It is difficult to have anxiety in the presence of loving brothers and sisters.

## III. APPEAL (8-9)

The first seven verses were introductory. They provided the framework for the forthcoming discussion about Onesimus. Specifically, the real purpose for sending the personal epistle becomes apparent at verse 8. Paul is now about to appeal to Philemon to forgive and to receive the converted runaway slave as a spiritual brother.

The inferential conjunction "wherefore" (*dio*) introduces this

<sup>16</sup>Perfect passive indicative: *anapepautai*.

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section. Since Philemon had manifested past kindness toward all other saints, Paul inferred that his friend would show equal grace to a new brother, Onesimus.

How should the appeal be made? Paul had two choices. With an open heart, he disclosed to Philemon the basis of appeal which he rejected, and the one which he followed.

### A. Authority (8)

#### 1. Paul had authority over Philemon

Paul's authority was only in the spiritual realm ("in Christ"), in the sphere that pertained to Christ and to His gospel, because that was the domain to which he had been called. This was not civil or social authority; rather, it was ecclesiastical. Christ commissioned Paul to become an apostle (I Cor. 9:1-2; 15:8-10; Gal. 1:1). Apostles had primary, general authority over all churches and believers (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). They laid the foundation for the church in their oral and written exposition of the significance of Christ's redemptive work (Eph. 2:20).

Such authority gave Paul literally "much boldness" (*pollēn parrēsia*). This phrase denotes a total freedom to speak dogmatically under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. Only apostles and their officially designated representatives could demand obedience for their directives to the churches (I Cor. 4:16-21; II Thess. 3:14).

#### 2. Paul could command Philemon

The apostle had the right "to enjoin thee [Philemon] that which is convenient." If he had chosen to do so, Paul could have forced Philemon to comply with the former's wishes. In that situation, Paul could have commanded the Colossian assembly to discipline Philemon if the latter had refused to obey. In fact, forgiveness is not optional; it is obligatory to each believer (Col. 3:12-13).

### B. Love (9)

Paul chose "rather" (*mallon*) to exhort Philemon as friend to

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friend, brother to brother, not as an apostle to a church member. The closeness of their relationship is further seen in his usage of the verb "beseech" (*parakalō*) rather than a direct imperative.<sup>17</sup>

### 1. Appeal out of love

Paul did not command Philemon "for love's sake." Paul dearly loved his spiritual brother (1,7), and loved ones do not command each other. The usage of the definite article ("the love") shows that this was the apostle's specific love for Philemon, not a general love for all men.

### 2. Appeal out of position

Paul identified himself to the church at Colosse as an apostle (Col. 1:1), but he did not mention that high office to Philemon. He approached his friend on the basis of two positions.

First, he was "Paul the aged." There is a slight textual problem here. Some Greek manuscripts read "aged" (*presbutēs*) while others contain the word "ambassador" (*presbeutēs*). Paul, of course, was both. Since ambassadors were usually mature, experienced men, the concepts of age and diplomacy go together. Elsewhere, he described himself as "an ambassador in bonds" (Eph. 6:20). As an ambassador for Christ, he was committed to the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:20). The purpose behind this very epistle was to bring Philemon and Onesimus together in a new loving relationship. An ambassador, of course, is one who blends authority with gracious humility and courtesy. Such tact marked Paul's approach.

Second, he was "also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." This second mention of his imprisonment served to invoke sympathy within Philemon (1). How could the benevolent Philemon refuse any request from his close friend who was in Rome for the cause of Christ?

## Questions for Discussion

1. How many of your friends and relatives would you describe

<sup>17</sup>The verb is related to the noun "consolation" (*paraklēsin*, 7).



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as "beloved"? How does a believer gain such an intimate relationship with another?

2. How can whole families work together in the cause of Christ? How can the charge of nepotism be avoided?

3. Should believers meet in houses today? What advantages or disadvantages are there in meeting in private homes? in church buildings?

4. In what ways can believers manifest hospitality? to the unsaved? to strangers? to church members?

5. Do Christians restrict their generosity to a select group of friends? to members of their own race?

6. What types of social programs should churches support? How much time and money should be invested in them?

7. When should parents deal with their children out of mere authority? out of love? out of both?

## The Appeal to Philemon

Philemon 10-25

The opening words, "I beseech thee," begin the formal appeal. Paul repeated the verb for emphasis and for effect. He made it clear that he was not issuing a command.

### I. HIS REQUEST (10-20)

The personal character of the epistle becomes especially evident in this section. In the English text, Paul frequently refers to himself: "I" (eight times); "me" (seven); "my" or "mine" (six); and "myself" (once). Such an intimate request must have had an impact on the heart of Philemon.

#### A. Object of Request (10-14)

The preposition "for" (*peri*) indicates the person for whom Paul is making request. Eight statements describe him.

##### 1. *He was Paul's child (10a)*

Who can resist an appeal when it concerns a child? For example, foreign orphanages often make financial requests and show pictures of starving and naked children. These requests appeal to such human compassion.

The slave was literally the "child" (*teknon*) of Paul, rather than his son. Paul used the emphatic possessive adjective ("my") to stress the spiritual father-child relationship which now existed be-

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tween him and Onesimus (*tou emou teknou*). The grace of God is also magnified here by the fact that a free Jew claims to be the spiritual father of a Gentile slave.

### 2. He was Onesimus (10b)

Philemon, his family, and the Colossian church must have been surprised when Onesimus reappeared along with Tychicus and the two epistles. They probably thought that he was gone forever, but now he had come back into their lives.

Onesimus' name literally means "profitable." It is based on the noun "profit" (*onēsis*) and the verb "to profit" (*oninēmi*). In the verse, the name actually appears last, after the statement of birth. Paul described the relationship before he gave the name of the new spiritual child.

### 3. He was born in Paul's bonds (10c)

Although repentant sinners are born of God, receive His nature, and are therefore the children of God (John 1:12-13), yet in some sense it can still be said that one Christian gives spiritual birth to another. Paul recognized this truth by stating his active participation in the evangelistic birth process ("whom I have begotten in my bonds"). He witnessed to Onesimus and led him into a saving experience with Christ; therefore, he had begotten the slave. Elsewhere, Paul described this same human involvement in bringing people into the family of God: "... for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (I Cor. 4:15). God and man labor together at the moment of the new birth; both need each other. Paul explained his physical and emotional involvement with these maternal words: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19).

The conversion of Onesimus occurred during Paul's imprisonment at Rome ("in my bonds"). In his other confinements, the apostle had led the Philippian jailor and possibly some other prisoners to Christ (Acts 16:25-34).

### 4. He was once unprofitable (11a)

Three features are indicated. *First*, Onesimus was "unprofit-

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able" (*achrēston*). This adjective is derived from a verb which means "not to use" (*a* and *chraomai*). He thus was a useless slave, one who failed to do his assigned tasks and who eventually cheated his master and fled.

*Second*, this profitless life was "in time past" (*pote*), the period of his unsaved life when he served Philemon.

*Third*, Onesimus was useless to Philemon ("to thee"). As the human owner, Philemon became frustrated over the indolence of Onesimus.

### 5. He was now profitable (11b)

Three aspects of the radical change are stated. *First*, the sharp contrast between the past and the present can be seen in the two adverbs: "once" (*pote*) . . . "but now" (*nuni de*). The conversion of Onesimus ended one phase of his life and started the next.

*Second*, Onesimus was "profitable" (*euchrēston*). He not only was of use now, but he was of good (*eu*) use. Since he became saved, his life took on new meaning and motivation. He personified the principles which should mark the life of a Christian slave (Col. 3:22-25).

*Third*, Onesimus was profitable now to both Philemon and Paul. Although Philemon had known nothing about his slave's conversion and service at Rome, the order of the words, "to thee and to me," indicates that the usefulness of Onesimus to Philemon had already started.

### 6. He was sent back (12a)

At the time Paul commissioned Tychicus with the two epistles (Colossians and Philemon), he also sent Onesimus. Ellis commented: "The verb translated 'sent back' (ASV) can have the technical judicial meaning of 'to refer a case,' i.e., to allow Philemon himself to judge in the matter of Onesimus' freedom (cf. Luke 23:7, 11; Acts 25:21)."<sup>1</sup> Within that culture, Paul had to send a runaway slave back to his master. In addition, as a new believer, Onesimus needed to ask forgiveness and to make restitution for

<sup>1</sup> Earle Ellis, "Philemon," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1398.

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past wrongs. Like the prodigal son, he needed to confess before Philemon: "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee" (Luke 15:18).

### 7. He was Paul's bowels (12b)

Paul called Onesimus "mine own bowels" (*ta ema splagchna*). Earlier, Philemon had been commended for refreshing "the bowels of the saints" (7). Now, Paul wanted his friend to give the same generous reception to the converted slave. The apostle thus equated himself and his inner needs with Onesimus. The treatment of the slave in effect would manifest the treatment of the apostle, and vice versa.

The command was personal, direct, and decisive: "... thou therefore receive him."<sup>2</sup> Actually, the pronoun "you" (*su*) appears at the beginning of the statement, and the imperative (*proslabou*) is placed last.

### 8. He was a minister (13-14)

Onesimus profitably "ministered" in Rome after his conversion. This information probably shocked Philemon and his family. At this point, Paul shared his plans and feelings in three definitive statements. *First*, he wanted to keep Onesimus in Rome ("whom I would have retained with me"). A close working relationship developed between the two; thus, the apostle did not want him to leave. He was willing (*eboulomēn*) to retain Onesimus, but he could not force his desire on an unwilling Philemon.

*Second*, Paul wanted Onesimus to serve as the representative of Philemon in Rome ("in thy stead"). Epaphras represented the Colossians, Epaphroditus represented the Philippians, and Onesimus could do the same for Philemon. Paul disclosed that the converted slave "might have ministered unto [him]." The verb (*dia-konēi*) refers to a general ministry, not to the technical service of a church deacon. In what sense could Onesimus minister to Paul? He could work as a domestic servant in the apostle's hired house (Acts 28:30), pray, witness, and assist the Roman church. There is a tradition, stemming from the letter of Ignatius to the Ephe-

<sup>2</sup>The command is not found in the critical Greek text.

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sians, that Onesimus later became a minister and subsequently the bishop of the Ephesian church.<sup>3</sup> Since Paul was imprisoned ("in the bonds of the gospel"), Onesimus could have carried out strategic errands for the apostle.

*Third*, Paul wanted Philemon to make a voluntary decision about the future of Onesimus (14). The decision to retain Onesimus was not Paul's to make. Onesimus belonged to Philemon. Paul had to inform Philemon before he proceeded any further in his plans for Onesimus ("But without thy mind would I do nothing"). The noun "mind" (*gnōmēs*) stresses the concept of knowledge; by extension, it implies an informed, knowledgeable intellect. Philemon needed to have all the facts, and the only way for that to happen was to send Onesimus back.

The question centered around Philemon's "benefit," literally his "good" (*to agathon sou*). Earlier, Paul expressed his concern over an effective fellowship "by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you" (6). Philemon's prior hospitality had been offered freely out of love; thus, if he manifested goodness to Onesimus, it could not stem from a forced compliance to the apostle's desire. It could not be "of necessity" (*kata anagkēn*); otherwise he would forfeit the divine blessing for his good deed. Rather, it had to be done "willingly" (*kata ekousion*). The strong contrast between the standard of legalism and that of grace can be seen in the negative-positive comparison and the presence of the strong adversative "but" (*alla*). In giving money, a believer must do so "not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" (II Cor. 9:7). Such principles should also guide in the giving of forgiveness and in the freeing of slaves. Paul thus transferred the future of Onesimus from his will to the mind and will of Philemon.

### B. Background of Request (15-16)

The connective "for" (*gar*) joins this section to the preceding one. It introduces the reason for Onesimus' flight, his conversion, and his return to Philemon.

<sup>3</sup>Ellis, "Philemon," p. 1398.

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### 1. The separation (15a)

Why did Onesimus run away? Paul suggested an explanation ("perhaps"). His disobedient separation was within God's permissive will and was used by God to produce the conversion of Onesimus. What the slave did was wrong, but God can overrule wrong and use it to accomplish His ultimate purpose (Ps. 76:10; Rom. 8:28). In his testimony to the sovereign, providential direction of God, Joseph remarked to his fearful brothers: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

The verb "departed" (*echōristhē*) suggests that the slave was separated from Philemon by the will of God.<sup>4</sup> Onesimus bore the moral responsibility for his defection, but God actively was working out His will to get the slave to Rome and into direct contact with the apostle.

The separation was both brief and temporary ("for a season"). Literally, it reads "for an hour" (*pros hōran*).

### 2. The reception (15b-16)

The purpose for the separation is indicated in the clause introduced by "that" (*hina*). The separation has led to a reception. Perhaps, if there had been no separation, there would have been no reception. Since God has ordained both the end and the means to that end, His sovereign purpose must be recognized within human circumstances.

Three characteristics of the reception are delineated. *First*, Philemon would receive Onesimus "for ever." What is an hour compared to eternity? Temporary separation and service is so insignificant in relation to eternal fellowship and brotherhood. The verb "receive" (*apechēis*) conveys the ideas of restitution and completeness. It means "to have back, to have in return, to have the full." Philemon lost an unregenerate slave temporarily, but he received in return an eternal brother. In a sense, the conversion

<sup>4</sup>Aorist passive indicative.

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and return of Onesimus was a divine payment for the loss of his past services.

*Second*, Philemon should receive Onesimus "not now as a servant." His treatment of Onesimus could no longer be the same, now that conversion had taken place. The little comparative word "as" (*hōs*) is critical here. Onesimus was still a slave even though he was saved; however, Philemon could no longer view him as a mere slave ("but above a servant").

*Third*, Philemon should receive Onesimus as a spiritual brother. The slave was now a "brother," a brother to Paul, Timothy, and even to Philemon. Some brotherly relationships, however, lack personal warmth; thus, Paul wanted Philemon to esteem Onesimus as a "beloved" brother in the same sense that the apostle loved Philemon (1). Paul regarded the master and the slave in the same way. With God and the apostle, there was no respect of persons or social status.

Paul's relationship to Onesimus was close because he led the slave to Christ ("specially to me"). Philemon, however, had known Onesimus longer ("but how much more unto thee"). The brotherly attachment had to be manifested in both the human and spiritual realms ("both in the flesh and in the Lord"). There may be a hint here that Onesimus and Philemon were blood relatives, perhaps even natural brothers. That speculation might explain the flight and the delicate nature of the return.

### C. Nature of Request (17-20)

The request to receive Onesimus was given earlier (12). In this section of the personal letter, Paul pressed the issue with a series of three imperatives. Together, they constitute the essence of his appeal.

#### 1. Receive him as me (17)

The basis of this request is found within the conditional clause, "if thou count me therefore a partner." The noun "partner" (*koinōn*) is related to the word "communication" (*koinōnia*; 6). Paul and Philemon were partners, men who had shared many experiences together, men who were bound by a common reciprocal



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love, men who shared the same spiritual motivation, and men who possessed a common salvation in Christ. The condition did not express doubt about this relationship; rather, Paul affirmed in it that Philemon did esteem the apostle as a partner.<sup>5</sup>

The appeal itself illustrates the principle of substitution: "... receive him as me." Since Philemon would receive Paul as a "brother beloved," then the master would have to welcome the slave in the same way.

This human relationship provides an excellent illustration of the divine program of salvation. By analogy, Philemon represents God the Father, Paul symbolizes Jesus Christ, and Onesimus reflects the repentant sinner. The believer is "accepted in the beloved" Son of God (Eph. 1:6). In essence, Christ says to the Father: "Receive the believing sinner as me."

### 2. Put that on mine account (18-19)

The basis of this appeal is found within the conditional clause, "if he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought."<sup>6</sup> In fact, Onesimus had done both. The first verb "wronged" (*ēdikēse*) deals with a legal injustice (cf. Matt. 20:13; Acts 25:10; I Cor. 6:7-8). In his counsel to Christian slaves and masters, Paul wrote: "But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done; and there is no respect of persons" (Col. 3:25). In his unsaved life, Onesimus had violated laws governing slavehood. The second verb, "oweth," implies financial loss through theft. In order to finance his flight, Onesimus probably had stolen money or valuable property which could be converted into cash. That money was depleted by this time. A Christian slave, on the other hand, should be marked by "not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity" (Titus 2:10).

The nature of the appeal is in the directive: "Put that on mine account." This imperative (*ellogēi*) is a technical, business term. Paul wanted to assume the debt. It reflected the attitude of the good Samaritan who told the innkeeper: "Take care of him [the

<sup>5</sup> It is a first-class condition, using *ei* ("if") with the indicative (*echeis*).

<sup>6</sup> It is a first-class condition, using *ei* ("if") with two indicative verbs: "wronged" (*ēdikēse*) and "oweth" (*opheilei*).

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pilgrim]; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee" (Luke 10:35). In such a situation, there must be implicit trust in the person's word and his ability to pay. In the spiritual analogy, it illustrates perfectly the doctrine of judicial imputation: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21). God the Father put the wrong and moral debt of the sinful world to the account of Christ; thus the Savior paid the penalty for the sin of the unjust (I Peter 3:18).

The guarantee of payment is contained in two statements: the fact and the promise (19). At this point, Paul may have taken the pen from his amanuensis and finished the writing of the epistle. The unique Pauline script was his signature affixed to the note of indebtedness (Gal. 6:11). Since the apostle had poor eyesight, Philemon must have been emotionally moved when he saw the guarantee written by Paul's own hand.

The promise of future payment was given in spite of the fact that Paul had little money in his possession. In this particular imprisonment, he was thankful for the financial support of others through direct gifts and voluntary labor (Phil. 2:30; 4:14-18). Since repentance involves restitution, Paul offered to make the loss good because he knew that Onesimus had no funds.

Some debts, however, are never recalled; they are either forgotten or canceled. Paul now reminded Philemon of the latter's debt to the apostle ("albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides"). What was this debt which had never been paid by Philemon? It is possible that Paul had purchased Philemon's freedom from slavery after the latter had become a Christian; however, there is no indication that the wealthy, generous Philemon had ever been a slave. It is more plausible to believe that Paul led Philemon to Christ. Philemon thus owed his salvation and subsequent happiness to the instrumentality of the apostle. To be delivered from the debt of sin and hell is so much greater than to be released from a financial obligation.

### 3. Refresh me (20)

The basis of this appeal is contained within the heartfelt wish of

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the apostle ("Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord").<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, joy comes from proper relationships between people, not from the possession of things. For believers, however, joy must be heightened by truth and spiritual guidelines ("in the Lord"). Believers are to encourage and edify each other. Paul desired that Philemon might minister to him through the proper treatment of Onesimus.

The nature of the appeal is direct: "Refresh my bowels in the Lord." Paul earlier identified Onesimus as his "bowels" (12). Since Philemon had been commended for refreshing the "bowels of the saints" (7), he now is charged to meet the needs of one more saint. He must not be a respecter of persons; he must treat all believers alike, including Onesimus.

## II. HIS CONFIDENCE (21-22)

As the epistle drew to an end, Paul expressed confidence ("having confidence") about two things.

### A. In Philemon's Obedience (21)

#### 1. To do what Paul requested

Paul had confidence in Philemon's "obedience" because the apostle knew the character of his distant friend. Philemon obeyed the will of God and manifested that submission through his love and faith (5). Such general obedience now had to be applied to the specific request of Paul. The apostle knew that his friend would obey all of the previous directives both in the letter and in the spirit.

Such confidence caused Paul to write this epistle. If the apostle would have had any doubt about the willingness of Philemon to comply, he would have retained Onesimus in Rome until his own release and return to Colosse (22).

#### 2. To do more than what Paul requested

Since Paul knew Philemon, he had confidence that his friend

<sup>7</sup>The optative verb (*onaimēn*) expresses a wish.

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would go beyond the minimum details of the request: "... knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say." How could he do "more"? Philemon could cancel any debt that he held against Onesimus; he could send Onesimus back to Paul in order that the slave might minister to the apostle (13); or he could give Onesimus his freedom. The third option would give Onesimus the choice to remain in Colosse or to rejoin Paul in Rome. The third option fits most closely with the biblical principle to forgive even as one has been forgiven by Christ (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Paul nowhere charged Philemon to set Onesimus free, but this last statement contains a hint toward that end.

### B. In His Release (22)

#### 1. Prepare lodging for me

Paul expected to visit Colosse and Philemon in the future, so he asked his friend to make preparations for his visit. Because of Philemon's past hospitality to others, the apostle knew that there would be a room for him.

#### 2. Reason for release

The explanatory conjunction "for" (*gar*) gives the reason behind Paul's belief in an imminent release from his Roman imprisonment. Although Caesar would grant the actual political acquittal, Paul knew that God would set him free as an answer to the prayers of many Christians ("through your prayers"; Phil. 1:19). The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of believers, as seen in prayer, complement each other. In fact, Paul looked on his release and return as a gracious gift from God to Philemon and his family.<sup>8</sup>

## III. CLOSING REMARKS (23-25)

### A. Greetings (23-24)

Five associates wanted to greet Philemon personally ("There sa-

<sup>8</sup>The words "your" (*humōn*) and "you" (*humin*) are both plural.

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lute thee"). These five were all mentioned in the closing section of the Colossian epistle (Col. 4:10-14).

Epaphras, a member of the Colossian church, apparently had been imprisoned also for the cause of Christ ("my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus"). His confinement necessitated sending Tychicus with the two letters (Col. 4:7-8).

The four others were still free and were designated as his "fellowlabourers."

### B. Benediction (25)

This typical Pauline benediction, with its emphasis on divine grace, was extended to Philemon, his family, and the entire church (1-2). The possessive pronoun "your" (*humōn*) is plural, not singular. Paul wanted them to have a corporate oneness with-in their assembly and in their treatment of Onesimus.

### Questions for Discussion

1. In what places and circumstances were people saved in biblical days? How do those circumstances correspond to modern evangelistic efforts?
2. How can believers prove to be profitable to others? unprofitable?
3. What different types of ministry are available today? How can believers prepare for these various services?
4. In what ways can a believer force someone to do something out of necessity, rather than willingly? How can this pressure be resisted?
5. How can wrong ultimately end in good? How does the plan of God incorporate the sinfulness of man?
6. How can believers forgive as they have been forgiven by Christ? Is any sin beyond forgiveness?
7. Why should believers pray? How does God bless the prayers of dedicated saints?

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