



Reflections on Philemon

Don Merritt

Introduction

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All blessings to you in Christ!

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An Introduction to Philemon

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

Colossians 4:7-9

Not a great deal is obvious about Paul's letter to Philemon, yet a few things can be gleaned by the names mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Colossian church. It would seem from the Philemon text that Onesimus is a slave belonging to Philemon who ran away from involuntary servitude and somehow ended up in Paul's presence and came to accept grace through Jesus Christ. In our day, we might have a knee-jerk reaction against Philemon when armed with this information, but we would misunderstand things a bit if we did. Remember that Paul wrote this letter in the Roman world of the first century, and that this world was based entirely upon a slave economy.

Historians give estimates of a slave population that made up from 25 to 50 per cent of the entire population of the Empire and for the people in the letter, it was not an issue.

You are probably aware that there are people in our time who claim that the Bible advocates human slavery and that Christianity is bad because it approves of slavery, and I suppose if all you are looking for is something to be critical of, and if you do not desire to understand what you are talking about, then this is as good an issue to bring up as any... but you would be missing the point entirely. Paul was not sending an Abolitionist rant to Philemon in this letter— what would be the point of that? Had he done so all he would have done was to anger him and have that anger taken out on Onesimus. Paul wrote to Philemon to ask him to forgive Onesimus and allow him to return, as a brother, to Paul.

In all likelihood, this letter was sent off to Philemon at the same time his letter to the Colossian church was sent to Colosse, and so we infer that Philemon must have lived somewhere in the vicinity of that church. Perhaps the group which met in Philemon's home was directly associated with that congregation, or it was a close-by one. It is clear however, that Paul had gotten to know Philemon when he had been in that region on his third missionary tour.

The issue that makes this letter a valuable one for us is how Paul approached Philemon with his request. He did so with skill and sensitivity that we all need to take note of, for he approached the subject with love and without judgment— would we do the same under those circumstances?

Let's move on, and begin our investigation in earnest...

Paul Opens His Letter

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1-3

In his customary manner, Paul begins this letter by saying who the senders are, and to whom it is written. Since we have inferred that it was sent at the same time as his letter to the Colossians, it is very interesting to compare the two openings:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Colossians 1:1-2

Aside from the obvious difference in recipients, it appears identical... well, almost. Notice that in his letter to the Colossian church, Paul describes himself as "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God", and in Philemon, he describes himself as "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus".

Why do they differ?

As in most everything, people have their theories, but it appears to me that Paul takes a different tact here in order to do two things: First, he is not writing to Philemon as an apostle, someone who is to be listened to with an obedient ear in reverence. Instead Paul is writing this man-to-man, friend to friend, brother to brother; it is entirely personal as opposed to professional. Second, by mentioning the fact that he is in chains for Christ, and he will mention this four more times before he is finished, he is showing his friend Philemon that he is enduring a great personal sacrifice for Christ as he is asking Philemon for a sacrifice of his own.

Paul has also introduced some more characters, Apphia and Archippus, and all three have a description of their own given them by Paul. With so little to go on, there are more theories, but most scholars agree that Apphia is Philemon's wife and that Archippus is his son, and I will continue under that assumption. Notice that the three descriptions indicate that each is a committed follower of the Lord, and that they all have a very close personal regard for one another.

Believe it or not, the biggest controversy in academic circles with these verses is whether or not Paul intends for this letter to be read to the entire church that met in Philemon's house. Personally, I don't see the point of the dispute: Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. At least they were to receive his warmest greetings.

As we continue, we'll next have a look at Paul's prayer- see you next time!

Paul's Prayer for Philemon

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Philemon 4-7

As was the custom of that time and place, Paul moves from his greeting into a prayer of thanksgiving for his recipient in vv. 4-6, and transitions into the main body of the letter in v. 7. In writing this the way he did, Paul shows extreme skill as he approaches his reader with a touchy subject. Notice how his prayer prepares the way for things he would say in the body of the letter... prayer in verses 4 – 22; love in 5 – 7,9; fellowship in 6 – 17; good things in 6 – 14; hearts in 7 – 12,20; refresh in 7 – 20; and brother on 7 – 20 (see also this passage cf. Col. 1:3-14).

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers (v. 4) If you are Philemon and you have found out, or are about to find out that your runaway slave Onesimus has been with Paul, you might wonder what he has been saying about you: Has he been telling Paul all sorts of lies about your treatment of him to justify his having run off? From this you can see that he hasn't told Paul anything that would cause him to think ill of you, for Paul is always thanking God for you.

because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. (v. 5) Paul continues here from the preceding verse and gives the reason for his thankfulness, and in doing so, he has an opportunity to remind Philemon of what kind of man he is in the faith— one who truly loves God's people and whose faith is in Jesus Christ.

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. (v. 6) Sad to say, this is the controversial verse in the paragraph with scholars debating almost every word and ending up with various interpretations. The genesis of the debates comes from the fact that the original Greek doesn't have any words for "I pray that". Thus, the NIV and many other translations, include those words as a matter of interpretation on the part of the translators to make the English work in the sentence. We are left with an unanswered question: Is this actually what Paul was praying for, or was he making a statement?

When I look at it, it doesn't really matter. Whether Paul prays this, hopes this or knows this doesn't really change anything for us, and I have to assume that Philemon caught Paul's intent in a way we cannot so far away in time and culture. For our purposes, considering the reason for writing in the first place, notice Paul's use of certain key words: "your partnership with us" "effective in deepening your understanding" and "we share for the sake of Christ".

Paul is about to ask that Philemon *share* Onesimus the slave with him for the sake of Christ; his meaning seems a bit obvious to me.

Finally, the last sentence brings us the transition to the main body of the letter, which we will dive in to in the next section.

On the basis of love

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Philemon 8-11

Paul begins the main body of his letter of request to Philemon by linking it to the previous paragraph with the word “therefore”. So, he’s saying because of all of the things I’ve just mentioned in the prayer paragraph, I am appealing to you as an old man in prison for Christ, and not as an apostle who can issue commends (which he still is).

Paul was asking in humility, not demanding or commanding.

Notice he says that the appeal he makes is on the “basis of love”. It is important for us to have a good understanding of love, for all too often, we associate “love” with all of the wrong things, and often enough our use of the term is, well let’s just say a tad bit disingenuous. Paul is not using the word “love” to justify some kind of wrongdoing, as we so often see in our time. One time 20 years ago or so, I was in a church leadership meeting when a very hot topic was being discussed. A bit of a debate took place, and one or two tempers began to rub thin, and finally one of the men, a bit gruff usually, but a great guy, suddenly blurted out in sheer frustration “F*** you! And I mean that in love brother.”

You just can’t invoke love like that.

Another thing that happens periodically in Christian circles is the use of love to shame someone into going along with others in something they don’t agree with. “Don’t you love the Lord? Don’t you love your neighbor?”

Can’t you build a persuasive case with solid reasoning and facts?

Paul is not doing any of that in this letter. Instead he is humbling himself to appeal to his dear friend for the sake of a vulnerable servant for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. Notice the last part: *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. (v. 11)* With these words, Paul is appealing to a cause higher than the immediate problem of economics, the cause of Christ. Before Onesimus accepted Christ, he was of no use to the cause of Christ, even though he was useful for slave labor to Philemon. Yet now, as a brother in Christ, trained by the apostle Paul, he too, has a higher calling to serve the Lord they all loved.

This dear reader is what it means to appeal on the basis of love, for Philemon is being asked to make a financial sacrifice, Paul has sacrificed his freedom, being in chains for the cause of the Gospel, and Onesimus is leaving his post to become the servant of God.

Paul Continues...

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not

want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon 12-16

Paul continues with his appeal; in these verses coming to his request: He wants Philemon to send Onesimus back to him to serve as Paul's helper in spreading the gospel. It would certainly have been more efficient had Paul kept Onesimus with him in Rome, and simply written to Philemon and told him what had happened and asked permission for Onesimus to stay. Instead, Paul sends Onesimus along with the requests. This not only might impede Paul's work, considering his circumstances, but it also risked Philemon taking very harsh steps with Onesimus for being his runaway slave: Onesimus could have even been put to death.

Paul made a choice to place his trust in God, that Philemon would do what was right in God's eyes.

Once again in these verses Paul's humility in the situation in that he left everything in Philemon's hand miles away and made no attempt to compel him to do or not do anything, submitting instead a humble request.

Of course, his humble request was not without its persuasive components: *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother (vv. 15-16a).* Who knows Philemon, maybe God had a hand in this, for even though you might have lost a slave, you've gained something far better than just a slave, you've gained a dear brother and fellow worker in the Kingdom. *He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.* (16b) Notice Paul writes as a man, and not as a slave.

So, if you were Philemon reading this, could you refuse Paul's request at this point?

I couldn't, and Paul has a little more to say...

A Personal Guaranty

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Philemon 17-22

As he ends the main body of his letter, Paul takes the extraordinary step of offering to stand as surety for any financial loss Philemon cares to name in sending Onesimus to Paul. In doing this, Paul has taken the pen in his own hand to write out this guaranty, an action that would have had significance legally, for of course Philemon would be suffering loss financially since a slave was an economic asset in that place and time. How much of a risk was this really for a man awaiting trial and execution?

Let's not forget that no one yet knew how that trial would come out, and Paul had been delivered several times before.

Even so, Paul did manage to slip in the fact that Philemon owed Paul a great deal for bringing him to Christ and eternal life: Paul has covered all the bases.

Persuasion again: *I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.* (vv. 20-21) That is an interesting turn of phrase: "refresh my heart". Clearly, Paul means "do what I ask", and we see that because he speaks of his confidence that Philemon will do even more than he has asked and uses the word "obedient" for the first and only time in the letter.

There's no way Philemon can gracefully refuse at this point!

Oh yes, one more thing old buddy, get that guest room ready, for I'm planning a visit soon.

Game, set, match. Paul concludes his letter in verses 24-25 in the customary way, sending greetings from his companions who are with him, but interestingly, they were also witnesses of the letter and would serve as witnesses to both Paul's guaranty if necessary, and to Philemon's refusal, should that be case; just a tad more subtle pressure.

As I mentioned before, the institution of slavery was not an issue in the first century. However, having a brother in Christ imposing slavery on another brother in Christ brought about a delicate dilemma, for how can we love one another in Christ, while holding them in chains?

Back in the mid nineteenth century in America, most preachers spoke out against slavery, but there were some in Southern states who cited this letter as proof that God was all for it. Maybe I'm crazy, maybe it's the times I live in, but it seems to me that a person would have to work very hard in their effort to miss what is being said in all of this, very hard indeed.

We can't know for certain what happened next in this story, for there is no record remaining. Honestly, a better question would be to ask why this letter was preserved in canon at all. Once again, we don't have anything to establish absolutely how this came about. As I reflect on that, one little bit of historical minutia keeps coming to mind. I recall reading an old letter somehow preserved from the early second century written by a man named Ignatius of Antioch to the church in Ephesus. In the letter Ignatius mentions the name of a man who had served as bishop of Ephesus. His name?

Onesimus. Was this our former slave?

No one knows. But what were the chances that it would have survived otherwise?