

12. Letter to Philemon

[54AD]



This is Paul's shortest letter. It is a personal letter written to a man called Philemon about his slave, Onesimus. They both appear to be members of the Christian community in Colossae (see Colossians 4:9).

It is a beautifully composed letter, filled with respect and love. It reveals Paul's deeply affectionate nature. The loving way in which he appeals to Philemon in a matter of great delicacy, but also of great importance, gives us a privileged insight into Paul's wisdom and into the way in which he lives the gospel which he preaches.

Onesimus is a slave in the household of Philemon. For reasons which are not explained, he absconded from Colossae and made contact with Paul. It may be that he had heard of Paul from his Christian master and came searching for him, hoping that he would mediate with Philemon to better his situation. Such a practice was not uncommon. In which case, he may have intended to return to Philemon all along, rather than face the severe punishment of the law against runaway slaves.

On the other hand he may have been chancing his fortune and his meeting with Paul may have been unplanned. In any case, having met Paul he has become a Christian and Paul has persuaded him, if such persuasion was necessary, to return to his master, with the letter which we have before us.

On the subject of slavery Paul writes: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus' (Galatians 3:28); and also the commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:21-22 where he writes: 'Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. However, if you can gain your freedom, take the opportunity. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of the Messiah'.

Domestic slavery was part of the social fabric of the day. Some slaves were prisoners of war. Others were kidnapped by slave hunters. Still others were enslaved through debt. We will miss the point of this brief, personal, letter if we expect it to include Paul's thinking on the subject of slavery as an institution. However, we will also miss the point if we fail to see that what Paul writes here is a radical challenge to the master-slave relationship.

An interesting suggestion has been made as to why such a brief personal letter was preserved. A man names Onesimus was a bishop in Ephesus in the opening years of the second century (see Ignatius of Antioch: Letter to the Ephesians I.3). It is likely that Paul's letters were gathered into a book at this time for wider distribution. If Onesimus was the person responsible for this, and if he is the Onesimus of Paul's letter to Philemon, this would explain the inclusion of this letter

Philemon 1-5

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend (ἀγαπητὸς). and co-worker,
to Apphia our sister (Philemon's wife?),
to Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank (εὐχαριστῶ)
my God because I hear of your **love** for all the saints and your
faith toward the Lord Jesus.

Philemon 6-7

I pray that the sharing (κοινωνία) of your faith may become effective (ἐνεργῆς) when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Addressing Philemon as ‘my brother’, Paul assures him of the joy which he experiences from Philemon’s love and the encouragement it gives Paul to see Philemon so beautifully refreshing the hearts of the Christians in Colossae.

Philemon 8-12

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal (παρακαλέω) to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man (πρεσβύτης - middle to late 50's), and now also as a prisoner of the Messiah Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus [useful], whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, **my own heart**, back to you.

Philemon 13-16

I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service (διακονέω) to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh (in ordinary everyday life) and in the Lord.

Onesimus, a slave, has found the only freedom that ultimately counts: the freedom that comes through faith in Jesus. The challenge that Paul is putting to Philemon is: is he, Philemon, free enough to respond in love to grace?

Philemon 17-21

So if you consider me your partner (κοινωνός), welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in the Messiah. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

The Christian community was a small group, in no position to bring pressure to bear to get rid of slavery. Paul doesn't indulge in a moral or political discourse. Rather he approaches Philemon as a brother in Christ. If society listened to Paul's words, people would see how wrong slavery is.

Philemon 22-25

One thing more – prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers (also mentioned in Colossians 4:10, 14). The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

We know from the Acts that Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4). He was in Ephesus with Paul and was caught up in the riot that ensued when the populace turned against Paul and his companions (Acts 19:29). Luke tells us that after Paul left Ephesus, Aristarchus was among those who accompanied Paul from Corinth to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4), was with him in Caesarea and travelled with him to Rome (Acts 27:2).

The fact that Mark and Luke are with Paul in Ephesus is interesting when we reflect on the similarities between their gospels