

## PHILEMON

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout Christian history, the epistle to Philemon according to Alfred Barry, Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol VIII, p. 263 has "remained unshaken as one of the epistles accepted by all."

Person Addressed: This is the only example of a private letter of Paul which has come down to us, despite the fact of their having been, in all probability, a vast volume of such personal correspondence as that which lies in this.

Paul's friend and convert Philemon, a distinguished citizen of Colossae, is the addressee. Outside of this epistle and a reference in Colossians, nothing is known of him except as may be surmised and pieced together from the few verses before us.

### PHILEMON

It is believed that Philemon was a citizen of Colossae, despite the fact that no specific text says so. His slave, Onesimus, however, is spoken of as being "one of" the Colossians (Colossians 4:9), the inference being that both Philemon and Onesimus lived there. He owed his conversion to Paul. (Philemon 19) J. R. Dummelow, Commentary on the Holy Bible, p. 1009 wrote: "Philemon's house was the habitual meeting place of a group of Colossian Christians." (Verse 2)

Members of Philemon's family are also accorded a place in the salutation, these being Apphia, his wife, and Archippus his son.

Purpose of the Letter: Philemon's slave Onesimus had run away from, his master, finally making his way to Rome where Paul was retained in the first imprisonment. How Onesimus came in contact with Paul there is not known; but they met, Onesimus subsequently being converted to Christ.

Regarding the name of Onesimus: This name means "profitable," a not uncommon designation of a slave in Phrygia. Nothing emphasizes the

dehumanization inherent in slavery any more than the names given by masters to their slaves. They were called “ear of corn,” “city boy,” “dainty,” “delicate,” or simply numbered after the ordinal numbers, “primus, secundus, tertius, quartus, etc.”

**Date and Place of Writing:** This letter is admitted to be one of the four prison epistles, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians being the other three; therefore, the place of writing had to be either in Caesarea or Rome, but the preponderance of evidence identifies Rome as the place from which Paul wrote these four letters.

**Utility of Philemon:** The temptation to downgrade the doctrinal value of this letter should be resisted. Adam Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 667 wrote the following summary of the doctrinal applications of it.

1. All Christians, regardless of riches, power, or social station are on an absolute equality. The slave is a “son” of an apostle and a “brother” of every Christian on earth.
2. Christianity does not alter civil status or obligation. A slave does not become free by baptism. The great heresy of the Crusades that all private debts were cancelled for “pilgrims” was contrary to this.
3. Apostolic example bids us to seek out the humblest and lowliest of men in order to seek their salvation.
4. Restitution is a principle involved in repentance. Where possible, restitution must be made, unless freely forgiven.
5. We should forgive those who have sinned against us, especially those who repent, return and request it.
6. Even an apostle, on occasion, consented to make his appeal, not upon the basis of authority, but upon the basis of love, trust and friendship.
7. Here was launched the ethic that eventually destroyed the institution of slavery throughout the civilized world.

8. Christians should never despair of winning even the most-wicked of criminals for Christ. Even among the very wicked there are a few who could be won.

R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Saint Paul's Epistles, Philemon*, p. 952 wrote: "The whole letter is of pure gold. No wonder the church placed it in the canon."

### **Verse 1**

"Prisoner . . ." In his very first words, Paul stressed his bonds, an appealing and appropriate means of enlisting the sympathetic hearing of the appeal he was about to make. Although technically a prisoner of Rome, Paul always considered that he was actually imprisoned for the gospel, and therefore the prisoner of the Lord.

"Timothy our brother . . ." Timothy is mentioned here because he was well known to Philemon and other Christians in the city of Colossae.

"To Philemon . . ." The word Philemon means "beloved," which might have prompted Paul's use of it in this manner.

"And fellow-worker . . ." Paul used many words to describe his associates in the work of the gospel. There is absolutely no evidence that Paul used such words as "fellow—worker," "fellow-soldier" (verse 2), and "partner" (verse 17) otherwise than as synonyms.

### **Verse 2**

Apphia and Archippus are thought to be the wife and son of Philemon. The church in their house was one of many household churches so characteristic of the apostolic age of the church.

### **Verse 3**

This greeting used repeatedly at the beginning of Paul's epistles expresses the thought that Paul wishes, desires and prays that those greeted may possess that spiritual state, "which is the result of a right relationship between God and man." (Newport J. D. White, *op. cit.*, p. 212)

The bringing of such a state of tranquility was viewed by the Jews as being one of the main functions of the Messiah. (Luke 2:14)

#### **Verse 4**

Paul's prayer life was overwhelmingly abundant. He must have been constantly praying for thousands of people all over the ancient world. But did Philemon, who was such a true Christian, and whose gifts abounded to the work of the Lord, did he need to be prayed for? Indeed. Yes. No soul is so pure or devout as to be beyond the need of prayers. W. Jones Biblical Illustrator, Philemon, p. 28 wrote: "The best of all men know only in part, love only in part; and therefore we need to pray for them that their defects may be corrected and their lack supplied. On earth we are but wayfaring men who have not yet come to the end of the journey; therefore we need to be prayed for that we may persevere to the end and finally receive the crown of life."

#### **Verse 5**

The meaning of "faith" in his place is fidelity or faithfulness, a quality which is to be manifested first "toward the Lord Jesus" (vertically), and then "toward all the saints" (horizontally).

John B. Nielson, Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol IX, p. 703 wrote: "This sequence is especially significant because there is no proper human relationship unless there is first a right relationship with God."

"I hear of your love, and of the faith . . ." This is said of one whom Paul knew personally and had even converted.

#### **Verse 6**

The meaning of this verse is somewhat difficult to understand. William Hendriksen, Colossians and Philemon, p. 215 wrote: "The more thoroughly Philemon recognizes how greatly he himself has been benefited, the more inclined will he be to extend mercy and pardon to others, especially Onesimus. And the very fact that Philemon has manifested such a fine spirit in the past convinces the apostle that he is not writing in vain."

Whether Hendriksen's view is completely accurate or not, one thing is certain. The name of Onesimus, not yet mentioned by Paul, is nevertheless in the background of all that Paul wrote in these verses. A part of the delicacy and charm of the epistle lie in the very hesitation on the part of Paul in bringing up what must have been considered to be a very unpleasant subject with his friend Philemon. Paul cleared the ground and cultivated the soil very carefully before planting the name of Onesimus in verse 10.

### **Verse 7**

Paul's only hope for Onesimus had its fountain in the kind of man Paul knew Philemon to be; therefore, he dwells upon that before making his request. He will ground his appeal on the fact that Philemon is "a brother." R. C. H. Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 959 wrote: "No higher compliment can be accorded to any Christian." Donald Guthrie, *New Bible Commentary, Revised*, p.1189 said: "In the Greek, the warm address, brother, comes at the end, throwing even greater emphasis upon it."

### **Verse 8**

Paul never for a moment relinquished his right of command as an apostle of Jesus Christ but this verse, with the next, has the effect of saying, "Please do not consider the request that I am about to make as an order; it is not that at all, but an earnest plea from brother to brother."

"Though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you . . ." W. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 41 wrote: "This is a distinct assertion of the right to command."

Why did not Paul utter the command? There can be no doubt that Philemon would have obeyed it. The answer must lie in the fact that had any apostle written a commandment for Christian slave owners to free their slaves, the whole posture of Christianity with regard to the loathsome institution of slavery would have been altered. Persecutions, already looming would have been a thousand times more vindictive and destructive; and slaves by the thousands would have "accepted" Christianity whether converted or not, and a revolution would have been precipitated. Yet, we do not believe that it was fear of the consequences that caused Paul to make the approach he made here. He

did so because it was right; it was the way of the Lord; for Christianity does not operate in the social order as dynamite, but as leaven.

### **Verse 9**

In Paul's times, ambassadors were practically always "old men;" therefore the word for "old men" came to mean also "ambassador." R. C. H. Lenski is right in saying: "We prefer the reading "old man" to the inferior reading "ambassador," which some commentators prefer by appealing to Ephesians 6:20. The whole idea of ambassadorships is however, incongruous to the present connection; no commentator has been able to work into Paul's thought in a convincing way."

Some have objected to the fact that at the approximate age of sixty years when this was written, Paul was not old. In a relative sense, however, he was old. And for one whose life had been marked by the toils and hardships endured by the beloved apostle, it is not unlikely that many of the visible signs of old age were exhibited in his person.

### **Verse 10**

Onesimus was a runaway slave, and the heartless Roman law demanded the most awesome penalties. J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 321 wrote: "For the smallest offense he might be scourged, mutilated, crucified or thrown to the wild beasts," But Philemon was a Christian influenced by the laws and customs of his day, and it was by no means certain that the spirit of the holy gospel would enable him to rise above it; hence the pleading, pathetic urgency of this precious intercession.

"My child, whom I have begotten . . ." This was a metaphor well known to the Hebrews. Newport J. D. White, *op. cit.*, p. 214 wrote: "If one teaches the son of his neighbor the Law, the Scriptures reckon this the same as if he had begotten him." (Quotation from the Jewish Talmud) Paul identified himself with the cause he was pleading upon behalf of the slave.

## **Verse 11**

Since the word Onesimus means profitable,” many have supposed that Paul’s play upon words here was intended as a pun, as if he had said, ”Well, at last this profitable slave is living up to his name.” R. C. H. Lenski, op. cit., p. 963 pointed out that the two words for “profitable” derive from different roots. “This mars the supposed pun . . . In a real pun the words must have at least a similar sound; not even that is the case here.”

We also agree with Lenski in his further observation on this that ”A pun at this place in Paul’s letter would have been a mistake.” (Ibid)

## **Verse 12**

As a runaway slave in Rome, Onesimus was in constant danger of falling into the hands of the slave-catchers; and it would have been dangerous to have sent him alone; therefore Paul utilized the opportunity for having Onesimus, accompanied by Tychicus the bearer of Colossians, in the journey back to Colossians. John B. Nielson, op. cit., p. 699 wrote: “Although Tychicus is not mentioned in Philemon, he in the company of Onesimus is the bearer of it.” (Colossians 4:7-9)

## **Verses 13-14**

“I wished to keep . . . without your consent . . .” S. J. Eales, op cit., p. 3 wrote: “The former phrase denotes a natural but indeterminate impulse; the latter phrase denotes a deliberate conclusion of the will.

“That . . . he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel .” This seems to be a hint that Paul hoped Philemon would send Onesimus back to help the apostle during his imprisonment, a wish that, in all probability, Philemon might have granted.

“But of your own free will . . .” The principle of compulsion is not a valid option in the advancement of Christianity, or the principles of Christianity. E. Earle Ellis, Wycliffe New Testament Commentary, p. 891 wrote: “In Christ there is a completely new frame of reference that completely transforms all

earthly relationships. Brotherhood is the focus in which all other relationships must be evaluated.”

### **Verse 15**

By this Paul affirms that perhaps the whole unfortunate event of the flight of the slave was providential, after all. Did not Joseph say to his brothers in Egypt, “God sent me before you, to preserve life?” (Genesis 45:5)

“You should have him back forever . . .” means simply that Philemon would now have his slave permanently, but there may also be included the thought of all the redeemed having fellowship with their own eternally in heaven, In the case at hand, both meanings are appropriate. Alfred Barry, *op. cit.*, p.273 believed that: “It is better to take it in the absolute sense of fellowship in the life eternal.”

### **Verse 16**

The new relationship did not mean that Onesimus would be no longer a slave in the legal sense, for that was unaltered. The sense of the first phrase is thus, “no longer a servant only.”

“A beloved brother . . .” Any person obeying the gospel of Christ becomes the brother beloved of every other Christian, of whom all the rights, honors, privileges and love of Christian fellowship accrue as a right derived from their being “in the Lord;” and this is the heart of the great ethic which Paul here hurled in the face of a slave-owner. The institution of slavery would in time wither and fade away under the impact of such a concept as this. The apostle doubtless foresaw this; and yet, as R. C. H. Lenski, *op. cit.* p.967 said: “We fail to find the least hint here that Philemon ought to set Onesimus free.”

### **Verse 17**

This is a further appeal to Philemon based upon the premise that, after all, he is a partner with the apostle in the furtherance of the gospel.

### **Verses 18-19**

Many believe that Onesimus robbed his master before he ran off. James Macknight, *op. cit.*, p. 396 wrote: “But of this there is no evidence. Why then



impute crimes to men where there is no proof?” Adam Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 666 wrote: “Had the apostle been sure that Onesimus had robbed his master, he certainly would not have spoken in this hypothetical way.”

“I Paul, am writing this . . .” This legal-type bond in which Paul assumed any debt Onesimus might have incurred was for the purpose of clearing away any obstacle that might yet have stood in the way of his appeal.

The magnanimous action upon Paul’s part in taking unto himself the whole debt of Onesimus is similar to the fact of Christ’s assumption on the part of every sinner saved by grace the whole of the sinner’s debt, which, as in the case of Onesimus, is utterly beyond the power of the sinner to discharge himself. No more wonderful lines were ever written of one brother’s action upon behalf of another.

Paul here speaks in somewhat of a veiled manner, reminding Philemon of the debt which once he the master owed, and how it was all discharged in Christ.

#### **Verse 20**

S. J. Eales, *op. cit.*, p. 4 wrote: “Here the apostle relaxes into his friendly familiar manner after the grave and touching language of the last few verses.”

“In the Lord . . . in Christ . . .” These characteristic Pauline expressions mean the same thing, summarizing the whole conception of Paul’s theology of the salvation of men “in Christ.”

#### **Verse 21**

Alfred Barry, *op. cit.*, p. 274 commented: “This can hardly refer to anything except the manumission (being freed from slavery) of Onesimus, and possibly his being sent back again to Paul. Exactly in this way Christianity was to work out the release of the slave—not by command, but by free and natural inference of its emphatic declaration of the true brotherhood in Christ.”

#### **Verse 22**

Paul’s appeal carries the weight of, “Of course, you will eventually have to face me in regard to your handling of this request.

“Through your prayers . . .” Although Paul seemed to be optimistic concerning his forthcoming release he nevertheless willed that the matter should continue to be the object of fervent prayers on his behalf of the Christians. E. Earle Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 895 said: “It is noteworthy that the apostle who is most insistent about sovereignty of God is equally convinced that God accomplish His purposes through human instruments. He did not request prayers of Philemon, but assumed them.”

### **Verse 23**

“Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner . . .” John B. Nielson, *op. cit.*, p. 708 suggested: “The reference may be to a physical imprisonment, or it may mean captured by Christ.” There is no way of knowing certainly just what was meant.

James Macknight, *op. cit.*, p. 412 offers the following opinion regarding this fellow-worker of Paul’s: “This person is called the “faithful minister of Christ” (Colossians 1:7) . . . of whom the Colossians had learned the gospel. He is also called one of themselves, and one who had a great zeal for them. (Colossians 4:12-13) I think therefore that he was a converted Gentile, who had a great zeal for them. (Colossians 4:12-13) I think therefore that he was a converted Gentile, who had assisted the apostle in preaching at Colossae, and who was ordained by him to the office of the ministry in that church.”

### **Verse 24**

All of these are well-known New Testament names.

### **Verse 25**

“Your . . .” is plural. E. Earle Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 895 wrote: “The plural reference is to the whole group included in the salutation. Spirit appears to be a term for the whole man in his ‘new age’ outlook.”