

## **REFRESHING THE HEARTS OF THE SAINTS: THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON**

### **(Class Notes)**

*Paul's short epistle to Philemon is rather unusual amongst the books of the New Testament, in that it deals with matters of a purely private nature. Yet it serves an important purpose, in its insights about relationships in Christ, and in its practical applications of the spiritual rebirth. In it, Paul shows how Jesus can refresh our hearts and our relationships.*

### ***Paul, Philemon, & Onesimus***

While he was in prison, the apostle Paul wrote this letter to his friend Philemon, a believer who lived in Colossae. The letter concerns Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves. Onesimus had run away and/or stolen from Philemon, and then while seeking refuge he met Paul and became a Christian. Paul saw the situation as an opportunity for both to put their faith into practice.

Philemon is one of a group of epistles that Paul wrote while he was imprisoned, most likely during the house arrest in Rome described in Acts 28. During this time, he was allowed some freedom to pursue his ministry (verses 30-31). The epistles of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians\* were also written during this time, which corresponds to a date of about AD 60-62.

\* Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were probably all written and sent at the same time, with Tychicus as the primary messenger (Ephesians 6:21-22, Colossians 4:7-9). Philippians was most likely written at a different point in the same imprisonment or, possibly, during one of Paul's other imprisonments.

At this time, as the book of Colossians shows, the church at Colossae\* was being troubled by divisive teachers, but Philemon himself seems to have had good relations with others in the church. He was also the host to a group of believers who met at his home (see verse 2, below). This and the fact that he possessed slaves suggest that he was a man of considerable means, who was also likely to have been relatively well-known in the community.

\* Or, as it is spelled in many modern references and Bible versions, Colosse.

The letter is primarily about Onesimus, who had run away and/or stolen from Philemon\*. As many other slaves at the time had done, he had apparently traveled to Rome, counting on its size and its distance from home to protect him from capture. Onesimus had good chances of staying free in Rome indefinitely, but his spiritual rebirth gave him a reason to return, at Paul's urging.

\* A few modern commentators, either out of a desire to prove themselves smarter than the others, or because they are unhappy that Paul did not oppose slavery more strongly, have proposed some entirely different scenarios involving Philemon, Onesimus, and the other persons and places involved. But all early Christian commentators, and most present-day writers, understand the situation to be as it is described here.

Roman slavery\* was less brutal than slavery in American history was, but Roman slaves still had no legal standing, and anyone finding a runaway was legally required to turn in the slave to the authorities. A slave did have one right: if an 'owner' wanted to punish a slave by death or serious injury, the slave had the right to ask a friend of the owner to intercede personally. The owner did not have to change his mind after listening, but it made serious punishments a bit less arbitrary.

\* In the large cities of the Roman Empire, as many as one-third of the residents might be slaves. Slavery could occur for several causes. It was sometimes voluntary, though many also were born into slavery. Otherwise, debt and other financial problems were the most common reasons for enslavement.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How might it affect our understanding of the epistle to know that Paul was in prison when he wrote it? What possible parallels to Philemon and/or Onesimus might we find in our own lives or ministries?

### ***Greeting & Thanksgiving (Philemon 1:1-7)***

Before Paul discusses his main topic, he writes an extended greeting of thanksgiving and praise. Since Onesimus himself accompanied the letter, Philemon certainly knew that at some point the letter would address the situation, so there was no need for Paul to rush into it. The expressions of fellowship in these verses form the foundation for Paul's message to his friend.

In Paul's greeting (1:1-3), he refers to himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus", a point that he mentions throughout the letter. Paul and his co-writer Timothy greet not only Philemon but also Apphia and Archippus, who are usually thought to have been Philemon's wife and son\*, respectively. Except for one mention of Archippus in Colossians 4:17, none of the three are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, but the highly personal nature of the letter makes it nearly certain that they were related or at least were very close friends.

\* It is also possible that Apphia may have been Philemon's physical sister. In this case, Archippus would probably be a younger relative (or close friend).

The following thanksgiving (1:4-7) sets the tone for the rest of the epistle. Paul and Philemon had apparently enjoyed a close friendship in the gospel from Paul's time at Colossae, and Paul addresses him with considerable warmth. Yet even as he gives thanks for Philemon's faith, he also exhorts him to continue to put his faith into practice in new and greater ways\*. This leads up to his request on behalf of Onesimus, but Paul also has Philemon's own spiritual well-being in mind. By allowing his faith in Jesus to guide his relationships with others, Philemon himself will develop greater spiritual understanding and a deeper contentment in his relationship with God.

\* The phrase translated "sharing your faith" (by the NIV) has sometimes been misinterpreted as a reference to evangelism. It could include evangelism, but only insofar as it is one of many ways that our faith can be expressed in ways that affect others. Although Paul naturally approved of evangelism, it is not what he had foremost in mind here. In its context, he is encouraging Philemon to show his love for God through his treatment of Onesimus and others. Compare the ways that the verse is translated in various versions.

Paul then tells Philemon that he has "refreshed the hearts\* of the saints". Paul uses the phrase again in verse 20\*, after he exhorts Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Showing compassion to one another, and putting our faith into practice in our relationships, truly does have the capacity to renew and refresh us in the midst of our trials and struggles in this often cold and sinful world.

\* Instead of the usual Greek word for 'heart', Paul uses a different word (σπλᾶγνον, "splanchnon", loosely related to our word "spleen") that refers literally to the entrails, or figuratively to what is deep inside us.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How does Paul's thanksgiving look ahead to other ideas in the epistle? What do these verses tell us about Philemon? What does it mean to be "refreshed"? How can we refresh one another in the sense that Paul means here?

### ***The Spiritual Rebirth of Onesimus (Philemon 1:8-16)***

Now Paul comes to the subject of the letter, in addressing Onesimus's spiritual rebirth and his physical return to Philemon's household. By returning, Onesimus has accepted responsibility for

his actions, even to the point of exposing himself to punishment and re-enslavement. His spiritual rebirth has called him to risk or sacrifice the most basic and important things in this life.

Paul deliberately makes his appeal for Onesimus a request, not a command (1:8-11). He openly acknowledges that he could use his apostolic authority to 'order' Philemon to do as Paul tells him, but he does not want to put things on that basis. Instead, he asks Philemon to act solely on the basis of love: of his love for Paul and his love for God. Paul's reluctance to command Philemon is even more noteworthy when we realize the importance of what he asks.

While Onesimus has been away from Colossae, he has not only become a Christian, but has become very close to Paul. Paul refers to him as his son, a description he uses when he wants to stress the spiritual closeness of a relationship. Until now, Philemon's own relationship with Onesimus has not had any spiritual dimension, which is why Paul is intervening for him. Paul even makes something of a pun, in noting that Onesimus has gone from 'useless' to 'useful', as the name 'Onesimus' itself actually means 'useful'.

In sending him back to Philemon, Paul is making a decision\* that is a hard one both for him and for Onesimus (1:12-16). Paul's own preference, of course, would be to keep the now-useful Onesimus as a helper in his ministry. For his part, Onesimus would have had an even stronger preference for remaining free with Paul, rather than accepting an uncertain fate by returning. Instead, Paul allows Philemon to decide what to do with Onesimus, but he also gives Philemon every reason to be merciful.

\* Note that Paul by no means shows an acceptance of slavery in itself. Indeed, by not reporting Onesimus to the authorities, he was technically breaking the law. Instead, he takes it upon himself to act as the slave's advocate before his master. But since Onesimus had not yet been sentenced to any specific punishment, Paul again was probably in technical violation of the law. In all such cases, Roman law allowed the slave owner to make the final decision as he pleased.

To persuade Philemon to be generous, Paul has emphasized his own imprisonment and need for help, defended Onesimus, and praised Philemon's loving nature. He now adds an even more powerful argument: would Philemon prefer to view Onesimus as a slave, or as a brother? Now that Onesimus is a Christian, Philemon can have him back "for good" (verse 15) - literally, forever, for eternity. To a reborn believer, another believer is always more valuable as a dear brother or sister than as an earthly servant or helper.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Paul send Onesimus back? What did he hope would happen? Why didn't he fight harder to set Onesimus free? Are there any practical ways in which this situation and Paul's advice might apply to us?

### ***Philemon the Reborn (Philemon 1:17-25)***

Although Paul has persuaded Onesimus to return and place himself at Philemon's mercy, he also openly appeals to Philemon to be merciful. He also gives a gentle but rather obvious hint that Philemon could set Onesimus free entirely. Since Philemon himself is a reborn believer in Christ, he can deal with the situation much differently from the way that a worldly man would.

Paul thus calls Philemon to show his own reborn nature, asking him to welcome his own slave just as he would welcome the apostle himself (1:17-21). Knowing that Onesimus has done things for which Philemon was within his legal rights to punish him, Paul boldly offers to accept

responsibility for any and all damages that the slave has caused. He even takes the pen from his scribe (verse 19) to emphasize his sincerity in making the offer.

Finally, Paul again falls back on his own relationship with Philemon. He pleads for a 'benefit'\* in return for the incalculable benefit that Philemon has received from hearing Paul teach the gospel. He returns to his praise of Philemon (from verse 7) and, using the identical phrase, he asks that Philemon refresh Paul just as he had refreshed so many of the Colossian believers by his love and service. Paul also openly hopes that Philemon will do even more than forgive and accept Onesimus back (verse 21). Paul would like nothing better than to see Onesimus free to devote himself entirely to ministry, but he leaves the choice to Philemon.

\* This is another little pun, in that the word Paul uses for 'benefit' is another form of the same word that means 'useful'. He is almost literally asking for Philemon to give Onesimus to him, that is, to set him free.

The epistle closes with prayers and greetings (1:22-25). Paul's simple request to have a guest room prepared shows a remarkable faith, and it is also an implicit exhortation to Philemon to have faith as he prays for the imprisoned apostle. Finally, Paul passes along greetings from several of his fellow workers (all four of whom are also mentioned in Colossians, and who thus may have been with Paul in Colossae). One of them, Epaphrus (see also Colossians 1:7), is also a prisoner (though there is no way to tell whether he is allowed to stay with Paul).

These personal greetings, and Paul's closing blessing to Philemon and his household, set an appropriately caring tone in concluding an epistle that, despite its short length, is filled with some powerful implications for the ways that our own spiritual rebirth ought to affect our lives, ministries, and relationships. We do not know from history how Philemon responded to Paul's urgings, but if we think about what Paul has said, about the kind of man Philemon was, and about the ways that God's own hand was at work in this situation, we can make a pretty good guess as to how things turned out.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What exactly is Paul asking Philemon to do? What else might he be hinting at? Why would he approach the matter in such a way? In what ways might we find ourselves in a position similar to that of Philemon? What lessons can we learn from Paul's advice to him?

### ***Sources & References***

Commentaries on Philemon are often included in books on Colossians (and possibly other epistles). Following are some selected books that may be useful for further study of Philemon. Let me know if you would like suggestions for sources that might be helpful in your own study:

F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT)  
James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New International Greek Testament Commentary)  
Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon* (Anchor Bible)  
Frank Gaebel (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9*  
Peter Gorday (ed.), *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Ancient Christian Commentary)  
David Lipscomb, *I, II Thessalonians, I, II Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Gospel Advocate)  
R.C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians & Philemon* (Bible Speaks Today)

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