

# THE LETTER OF PHILEMON

## Prayer and the extent of the believer's liberty

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### *Introduction*

Down through the centuries there has been little dispute that this letter was authored by Paul.

The use of the personal pronoun "I" makes this clear.

Timothy was with Paul when the letter was written, Paul uses a term of endearment to refer to Timothy when he refers to them as our brother.

Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

Paul probably wrote this letter around 62 A.D.

The letter is addressed to Philemon, who the letter is named after.

Philemon is described as our dearly beloved and fellow labourer. Philemon was a member of the church at Colosse. Philemon was saved through Paul's ministry (Phil.1:19). Philemon owned at least one slave, named Onesimus, whose name means "useful". Onesimus ran away from Philemon, and therefore earned the penalty of being executed. While in this runaway status, Onesimus met Paul and became a believer. This meant that both Philemon and Onesimus became believers through the ministry of Paul (Philemon 1).

Philemon 2 identifies three other recipients of the letter

- 1) our beloved Apphia probably Philemon's wife
- 2) Archippus was Philemon's son our fellow soldier and
- 3) to the church that meets in thy home. By including the church met in home, Paul held "Philemon accountable to instruct the church on the matter of forgiveness."<sup>1</sup>

Paul greets the Philemon by blessing the recipients with grace and peace, from both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Philemon 3).

Grace can be thought of as the means through which a believer receives salvation, and peace the result of grace. Grace is the absolute free expression of the undeserved unmerited favour, loving kindness, and empowerment of God "to men finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver".<sup>2</sup>

Peace is restored harmonious relationship with God and others who love the Lord in which those restored enjoy benefits such as healing, inner harmony, and having one's needs met in such a way that they have sufficient to give to others.

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1892). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

## *Thanksgiving and Prayer (Philemon 4-7)*

Paul remembers them in his prayers always giving thanks for them.

Paul states that prayers, supplication and thanksgiving should be mixed together (Phil.4:6) and that in everything we should be continually thankful offering up prayers (1 Thess.5:17-18).

Paul's thanksgiving is not groundless. He has a reason for his thanksgiving. Paul has heard of both their love and faith, "love for other believers and faith in the Lord Jesus, for these are the effects of saving grace."<sup>3</sup> A love and faith that is expressed in devotion to the Lord Jesus and to all the saints. Paul rejoiced in the fact that the reality of Philemon's faith manifested itself in self sacrificial love and humility this had often resulted in bringing refreshment to the bowels and hearts (the centre of their emotional life) of the saints. This had been a source of great joy and encouragement to Paul (Philemon 7).

Paul provides Philemon and his fellow recipients an insight into the contents of his prayer. Paul prays that the sharing of their faith may become effective, may become powerful in and promote the knowledge of understanding of everything that is good, (every benefit) that ours in Christ. The sharing was "much more than simply enjoying one another's company. It refers to a mutual sharing of all life, which believers do because of their common life in Christ and mutual partnership or "belonging to each other" in the "faith".<sup>4</sup> Christians often experience a greater knowledge of the depth of all we have in Christ when we share our experience, fellowship and knowledge with one another.

## *The Main Appeal (Philemon 8 – 21)*

Paul motivated with joy and encouragement that he received from observing Philemon and his household progress since becoming believers wrote this letter which from now on takes on the form of an appeal.

Although Paul acknowledges that he had the right to make the appeal he was about to make as an Apostle of Christ, he did not want to present this request as a command, but rather as an expression of brotherly love (Philemon 8). Paul would rather make his appeal to them as a matter of love, not position, even though he held that position. Paul reminds them that he was now an old man (Dake estimates Paul was about the age of 56 when he wrote the letter).

Paul was in prison on behalf of Jesus Christ (Philemon 9). Paul is making this appeal on behalf of Onesimus who Paul had brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ while he was imprisoned. When Paul introduced Onesimus into a personal relationship with the Lord. Onesimus had become a spiritual child of Pauls, and Paul had become his spiritual father (Philemon 10).

In Philemon 11 Paul recognises that prior to his conversion Onesimus had been useless and unprofitable to Philemon, in doing so Paul recognises that Onesimus was the slave of Philemon. Now that Onesimus had become a believer he was now profitable and useful not

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<sup>3</sup> Beeke, J. R., Barrett, M. P. V., & Bilkes, G. M. (Eds.). (2014). *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (p. 1778). Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1892). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

only to Paul, but his master Philemon. Though once a bad slave he had become a valuable blessing in ministry to others. Paul was making a play on words, he who once had been useful had become useless had now been restored to being useful. This reminds believers that we who had been called to be useful to God, had by mean of the fall become useless, through Christ's death on the cross and through rising with Christ in his resurrection had been made useful in the Lord's service once more.

In Philemon 12 and 13, Paul stated that in sending Onesimus back to Philemon, he was sending his very own heart, so deeply, sympathetically and tenderly had Paul grown to love Onesimus. Instead of sending Onesimus back to Philemon, Paul would have gladly retained his services to minister to him while he was imprisoned for the Gospel. If Paul had retained Onesimus in assisting him in his ministry, Onesimus would have been standing in on behalf of Philemon in serving Paul.

In Philemon 14 Paul makes it clear that he could not retain Onesimus services, because had he done so it would amount to having gone behind Philemon's back. Paul would have acted without Philemon's explicit agreement. Paul had no way of knowing for certain what Philemon's mind was on this matter, and Paul did not want in anyway compel Philemon to do something against his will. For Paul to retain Onesimus services without Philemon's express permission would have been compulsion, not be an act of love.

Therefore, with great reluctance and with pain in his heart, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon (Philemon 15). "Paul called Philemon to view his temporary, earthly loss (*for a season*) in light of the eternal salvation of Onesimus, by which he gained him *forever*."<sup>5</sup>

In Philemon 16 Paul asked Philemon to receive the slave he owned, Onesimus, back into his service as a true brother in Christ. This teaches that the power of the gospel transforms a slave into a dear brother.

In Philemon 17 Paul asked Philemon to go beyond even this, Paul asked Philemon to receive him as his very self, as a partner in the gospel. A partner is a business term implying participation in a common venture. To some extent Paul was asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back into service as an Apostle, a messenger sent from God,

In Philemon 18 Paul ventured even further in his appeal, asking Philemon to charge Paul with any wrong or debt Onesimus may owe Philemon. "Paul offered to pay whatever restitution was necessary for Onesimus to be reconciled to Philemon"<sup>6</sup> just as Jesus had paid the redemption price to reconcile believers to the Father.

In Philemon 19 Paul offered to compensate Philemon for any financial loss he had incurred through absolutely anything Onesimus had done. Paul personally guaranteed in his own hand to repay Philemon for anything that Onesimus owed Philemon. Paul had probably brought Philemon into a saving knowledge of the gospel and declared that he would not remind

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<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1893). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

Philemon of how much he owed Paul, his very soul. Onesimus material or monetary indebtedness was nothing compared to the huge debt Philemon once owed and had been set free from when he had been saved. Paul had been instrumental in Philemon coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

If Philemon would forgive Onesimus he would be a vivid illustration of just how much God had forgiven all those who respond to the Gospel. Philemon's response would bring about reconciliation and increase the unity in the church at Colosse. Something that would bring great joy to Paul (Philemon 20).

In Philemon 21 Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon would do as Paul requested, but in addition to what Paul requested but far more. Philemon would undoubtedly give Onesimus ungrudging permission to minister alongside him in the gospel. However, this far more may not have included setting Onesimus free from slavery.

#### *Closing Remarks (Philemon 22-24)*

Paul requested that Philemon would keep a guest room for him. This was because Paul hoped he would have the opportunity to visit Philemon, Paul was possibly more than eager to find out how Philemon had responded to the appeal contained in this letter. Paul confidently expected to be released from his own bondage that he could continue his ministry.

One of Paul's fellow workers Epaphras sent Philemon his greetings. Epaphras was a faithful minister of Christ at Colosse, who always laboured fervently in prayer that the believers might stand mature and complete (Col,1:7; 4:12).

Paul listed other fellow workers who laboured with Paul in the gospel these were Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas and Lucas (Luke the physician).

Paul closed his letter as he had begun, by blessing Philemon with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### *Summary*

The letter of Philemon contains a wonderful message focused on two people. One, Philemon an influential man living in the city of Colossae who owns at least one slave. This slave, Onesimus runs away does not retain his loyalty to his master. By running away Onesimus places himself under the sentence of death. Paul leads Philemon to a saving knowledge of the gospel. Later, Onesimus accepts the gospel. A problem therefore exists, both have entered a relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, both have been reconciled to God and enjoy his peace. However, Onesimus still remains estranged from Philemon, and Philemon has the right to put Onesimus to death. Paul writes this letter, and pleads with Philemon to accept, forgive, release him from the sentence of death and restore Onesimus back into useful service, Paul powerfully argues on behalf of his child Onesimus, he even offers to pay any debt that Onesimus owes. Paul's powerful presentation on behalf of Onesimus reminds one of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ as our advocate (1 John 2:1). The survival of the letter and inclusion of it in the New Testament offer strong support that Philemon did as Paul requested.

The letter of Philemon contains some rich teaching on prayer. Prayer should always be accompanied with thanksgiving. This thanksgiving is not groundless but based on how God's

love is being demonstrated in the growth of those in the faith around us. We should pray for the believers to be effective in sharing their faith, knowing and understanding the depth of the faith to which they have been called and like Epaphras praying fervently for the maturing of the saints as they become increasingly Christ like.