

Philemon The Transforming Power of the Gospel

Introduction

This letter of Paul has a special place in his writings as it is not a formal treatise to a congregation or group of congregations covering a range of doctrinal and practical topics. Instead, it is a personal letter that may have been intended to be a private communication to this man and his family. Its survival almost certainly results from the success of Paul's request that the two men are reconciled. Ignatius the bishop of Antioch martyred approximately 108AD wrote a letter referring to Onesimus as the current Bishop (pastor) of the Church in Ephesus (Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 1:3). This would imply that at a date unknown Philemon had set him free to serve in wider Christian work in the neighbouring country of Turkey. Had I been in Onesimus' shoes I would have wanted a personal copy of it as his life and future depended on the success of Paul's plea to his friend and fellow Christian concerning Onesimus, legally a slave in the possession of Philemon, but now officially a fugitive on the run from his master and potentially at risk of being killed if captured before he arrived back at his owner's home. There are other letters in the Bible, for example 2 John and 3 John, but none carry the incredible social implications invested in this short communication between two friends. We know that slavery is indefensible. However, at this time when most Christians were enslaved persons for Paul and the other minority of free Christians to go on an anti-slavery crusade would have produced ridicule and indifference at best from the authorities, but most likely would have resulted in the plight of their enslaved brothers and sisters becoming even worse than it already was. We need to stand in the 'shoes' of people in a particular social context when we seek to pass judgements on the choices they have made. We cannot fairly judge them in the light of our own very different cultural context without making allowances for the options open to them two thousand years ago. Actually the approach Paul took was almost certainly the very best one open to him and allowed the young Christian congregations to model a new way of living for the wider society to observe. As their numbers grew over the next two centuries the Christian way of life was exceedingly attractive to many people who were then led to ask questions about their faith and practice. In other words the quality of Christian discipleship opened the door to conversations about faith and conversions to it.

Slavery was a normal feature of life in the New Testament world. Until Evangelical Christians raised voices of protest against it in the later eighteenth century, it had been accepted as 'normal' in this country too. The vast majority of people would not have thought ill of John Newton being a prominent participant in the slave trade prior to his conversion. Once he became a Christian his attitudes and values certainly changed. The Bible does not forbid or condemn slavery. At first glance we feel uneasy about this, but it goes further recognising that you can officially be free but be treated abominably. To treat a fellow human being as a brother or sister is the standard given. This is equally true of the Old Testament as well. Leviticus 25:39-43 *If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave.*⁴⁰ *He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee.*⁴¹ *Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers.*⁴² *Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves.*⁴³ *Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God;* though it was not as good for non-Jewish slaves (see Leviticus 25: 44-46) but it was still better than other nations around them. In the Roman world as many as 33% of an urban population were slaves; a further proportion of the population were 'freedmen', former slaves but entirely dependent on their former master for

survival; Others were independent citizens such as traders and citizens of other countries living in the empire and therefore a minority were full Roman citizens. It was only in 212AD that all free people in the Mediterranean area of the empire were granted full rights as Roman citizens. Slave numbers were probably at or near their height in New Testament times. In this empire one must not imagine a slave doing only the menial and unpleasant tasks others were specialised workers in, for example, the Civil Service, Education and Medicine -services only available to those who had private funds to pay for such services. If you were fortunate enough to go to school then your teacher was probably a slave owned by your parents. However, only the wealthiest families had the chance to educate their children and both boys and girls might receive it in that context. Likewise, many doctors employed on the same basis. This is the background to the world in which Onesimus lived.

1. What the letter reveals (Philemon1-7)

(a)**Paul's grateful appreciation of others** (Philemon1-3) *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker –² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* It is a private letter so no formal declaration of his status as a Christian apostle. There is no need as this recipient is a personal friend and who knows very well his office and calling. Instead Paul upfront states that he is *a prisoner of Christ Jesus* (v1) with the possibility that he may not see freedom again, but having admitted his current plight he writes with the conviction that he expects to be freed at some point in the near future. He is in good spirits but that cannot but have been boosted by a visit from his devoted friend and colleague Timothy. Scholars have different views on which imprisonment is being referred to here as that will affect the date in the 50sAD when this letter was written, but it is a minor matter as it has no impact on the significance of the contents of the letter. The letter is addressed *To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker* (v1). The friendship between these men is evident throughout this letter and although their times of fellowship were very limited any contact between them was appreciated. But what is the relation of the other people named here Apphia and Archippus? Thankfully this is commonly understood to be Philemon's wife Apphia and their son Archippus. Philemon and Apphia lived in Colossae. Archippus is understood to be the pastor of the congregation in nearby Laodicea, and is possibly of a similar age to Timothy, while his parents are ages with Paul, possibly around sixty years old at this time. These are two relatively small house-based congregations, but established witnesses along with similar causes in the other urban communities in that part of Western Turkey. It is a warm and friendly commencement of the letter that would be received in a similar manner by the recipients.

(b)**Paul's gracious attitude to others** (Philemon 4-7) (i) **Praise** (vs4-5) *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all His holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.* Sometimes there is confusion in the Christian Church when we mix up liking and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our calling is to demonstrate Christ-like respect for and service of our brothers and sisters without exception. This is a practical demonstration of Christian love. Jesus modelled this kind of behaviour when He washed the disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13:1-17). This was a task that only a Gentile slave would be asked to do at a Jewish function. As a result there would undoubtedly be many Jewish events where foot-washing didn't take place. Jesus shocked His followers by taking charge of carrying out this particular responsibility. However, we don't like every fellow Christian equally. There are some people we find it a real pleasure to be in their company and others that we have to put in serious work in order to have a productive working relationship.

So how can we seek to build friendships with one another in an effective and fruitful manner? Paul in his prayers found something to praise God for concerning His fellow Christians. Instead of focussing on their negative points- and is there anyone who is perfect and without fault in their attitudes, words and actions, by commission or omission? Find something good to commend when we bring them before the Lord, but even more revolutionary find something genuinely worthy of praise to commend them for when in conversation with them. This is not insincerely flattery but a desire to build up fellow believers by encouragement for what they have accomplished for the Lord. If this mindset is embraced then ties of friendship within a congregation and between believers in a wider context must be enriched. I cannot see it any other way. Paul is going to place demands upon Philemon shortly that without the deep and genuine friendship between them would have been rejected out of hand as being too difficult. Paul would be able to say what he said and expect what he anticipated from this man because of the investment he had made in his life over many years. We save money in the bank for a purpose –an investment for the future maybe ‘for a rainy day’; maybe to give to your children or grandchildren or some other worthy cause? But it doesn’t happen by accident it is a planned course of action. We ought to see investment potential in our relationships with one another – not primarily for our benefit so that people will like us- but for His glory and the growth of His Church in this local setting.

(ii) **Prayer** (v6) *‘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.’* If someone has come to your mind just now as someone you are struggling to get on with – make a point of praying for God’s blessing upon them in their lives being more specific about the request if you have any knowledge of them. You cannot invest in praying for someone’s wellbeing over a sustained period of time and wish them ill in practice. It is impossible! Paul sets an example for us here in his dedicated prayer life for this and other congregations. We don’t know how he organised his prayer schedule, but it is abundantly clear that he utilised moments of time to pray for an exceedingly large number of Christians over a range of countries in that part of the world. The people named in this letter give us a glimpse of the scale of this undertaking. Paul is praying for them and in this case for Philemon in particular that his faith may be even more evident in the choices he makes in daily life. We know where Paul is heading with this request to Philemon, but if Paul knew you and me quite well and choose to send us a letter about how he felt we could grow as a Christian, what do you think he might have put in a letter to you or to me? On what might he feel we could work on in this coming year?

2. What the letter requests (Philemon 8-16)

(a) **The relationship which Paul describes to Philemon** (Philemon v8) *Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do...* What one can do and what one ought to do in practice may be quite different sometimes. Wisdom and discretion are required to help us make the right choices in these matters. If Paul had simply ordered Philemon to do what he will outline later in this letter and Philemon refused, then their relationship might not have survived and neither might Onesimus have realised his desired outcome of this tricky situation. I assume from reading over this letter and reflecting on it that Paul in his mind rehearsed the words he would use and the tone of the letter many times before putting a copy of his words in written form. The younger Paul might have been more confrontational but would it have been as effective? I doubt it. Any good general knows that winning a war in which their country is engaged has to be the goal of their choices, but along the way they

might not win certain battles, but sacrifices sometimes need to be made in order to accomplish a greater good. The older Paul was more concerned with winning the person over than winning an argument. His views had not changed in any significant discernable way, but his inter-personal skills had become much stronger as the years passed by. In your own life over the last year or two – ask yourself -in what areas of my life have I grown as a person/ as a Christian? Maybe nothing comes to mind immediately! But ask a very good friend if they have noticed any positive changes in your life, it may lead to a very encouraging conversation or it may be that they can help you see a blind spot in some particular matter.

(b) **The fellowship which Paul desires with Philemon** (Philemon 9-16) ⁹ *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 –¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.¹² I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you.¹³ 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.¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever –¹⁶ 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.* The apostle invites his close friend whom he has known for many years on the basis of Christian love to consider a particular course of action. There is undoubtedly an emotional appeal. *It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus –¹⁰ that I appeal to you...* It is not from a position of strength but a position of admitted weakness on which Paul will base his appeal. He is an older man. Philemon might think I can say ‘yes’ to Paul now but possibly ‘no’ later if there is no sign of him returning to Colossae! Paul has acknowledged that he is in prison. Justice was rarely served in those days so his chances of an acquittal without resorting to bribery to the presiding officials were slim. [See an example of this with respect to Paul in Acts 24:26 concerning the Roman Governor Felix: *At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.*] no bribe no release was Felix’s decision. There was a high chance that Paul would never come to stay in Philemon’s house again even though he has high hopes for this possibility. As a result the only pressure Paul could exert on his friend was moral pressure. This approach worked because of the friendship between them

What is it that Paul asks here? He asks this man to welcome home a young man who is very likely to have behaved inappropriately in the past, incidents of which Philemon will be able to recall with ease, but now as Onesimus has been converted his actions reflect his name. Useless has truly become ‘useful’. Paul admits that he would like to keep Onesimus with him to assist in his work. Maybe he was even hoping that his friend would suggest that. But what is not in dispute is that Paul was asking Philemon to put to one side Onesimus’ failures from the past and going forward to treat him as if he was Paul himself coming to that home. These words speak powerfully to our lives and how we conduct relationships with one another. Do I keep retaining negative feelings to another believer because of their past failings, even though they may have apologised at the time or some time later? If the answer is ‘yes’, then I need to ask myself to reflect on the wonderful gospel of grace we proclaim and challenge myself to live more closely to it in my daily life. Paul does not ask for Onesimus to be freed, although he believed enslavement was wrong; instead he asks for something greater. Treat Onesimus in your home as if he were me your long lost friend! Allow him to stay in your home as a brother in Christ not as a slave. This was an explosive request! Like a soldier pulling the pin out of a hand grenade and tossing it around in an ammunition factory! It was also a Christian request. The letter to Philemon shows that the gospel has significant applications to our daily lives. We are called to live out our faith not just when it is easy, but also when it is incredibly

hard as well. Do you need to ask for prayer concerning issues over which you are struggling right now? All of us at times know the right course of action to take, but wonder how on earth we can actually accomplish it! Thinking of the society in which we live just now, is there an issue or situation in our land where the gospel brings a deep challenge to the majority view in our nation? Is there something I can do to make a difference whether it is something small or something much larger?

3. What the letter recalls (Philemon 17-22)

(a) **The debt of which Paul reminds Philemon** (Philemon 17-19) ¹⁷ *So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.* ¹⁸ *If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.* ¹⁹ *I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self.* If Philemon was tempted not to go along with his friend's request then the pressure is increased by Paul in these words. This man was led to Christ by Paul and clearly has the highest regard for him and his home is open to Paul to stay at any time. The chances of him billing Paul for any wrongdoing by Onesimus is close to zero! Philemon has received the gospel of grace by faith in Jesus. Now is possibly the hardest challenge for living it that he has faced. It is probable that Onesimus is home for good and in principle will work for him for the remainder of his life, but his other slaves would be watching closely as would his neighbours and other slave owners. The impact of choosing to act in a Christian way here would be far more influential than several years' worth of short conversations. People around us watch the way we live. Everyone can handle the routine and the generally good news scenarios of life, but seeing someone else handle more challenging life situations is a different thing altogether. It is in these situations that God may be most glorified in you and me. It is often only when we are faced with the reality of life situations that we find out things about ourselves that we sometimes didn't know. On some occasions we are able to handle with God's help situations that we had feared having to face. Maybe other challenges that we thought we could handle fairly well are ones with which we have struggled. If Philemon did as Paul suggested then both he and Onesimus would be changed men for ever. In view of Onesimus' future Christian service as a pastor in a neighbouring country it appears that this is indeed what happened. A question arises for you and me today: In what situation might God want to work a miracle of His grace in your life and mine in the coming months or years?

(b) **The debt which Philemon had to repay** (Philemon 20-22) ²⁰ *I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.* ²¹ *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.* ²² *And one thing more: prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.* Paul is certainly expecting a positive outcome here both in relation to the central request in his letter together with his own expected release from imprisonment by the Roman authorities. There is a play on words here as the word translated *benefit* here is from the same Greek root word from which we get Onesimus (useful). Is this a light-hearted or humorous comment from Paul? He is certainly deadly serious about the point of the letter but there is also a play on words both here and in verse 11 where he contrasts Onesimus formerly being *useless* unlike his name, but who through his conversion has become very *useful* to Paul and by implication will be useful to Philemon as well. There will be people whom you know who have encouraged and blessed you by words and acts of kindness whose names and faces may have come to mind while I am speaking. Take time to thank God for them and where appropriate express your thanks to them as well!

4. **Final greetings and prayer** (Philemon 23-25)

²³*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.* ²⁴*And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.* ²⁵*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.* There were rare occasions when Paul was on his own; II Timothy 4:16-17 records a good example of this, at a time when he was on trial for his faith in Rome near the end of his life. Paul wrote these words to Timothy: *At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.* ¹⁷*But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.* Was this deliverance literal in the sense of being thrown to lions or some equivalent peril? Whatever it was it was not pleasant, but God brought him through it. Here he has friends with him, one of whom Epaphras was also imprisoned for his faith, together with four other colleagues who ministered to them as free people. Epaphras is a Christian evangelist originally from Colossae so the recipients of the letter would know him well. John Mark we know well from his gospel and his association with Peter. Luke too, the author of a Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, a fellow Turkish citizen with Paul and a medical doctor; Demas at that stage was a faithful team member, but later the persecution and oppression the Christians faced caused him to resign and go home back to Thessalonica (II Timothy 4:10). Aristarchus was a Jewish follower of Jesus who came from Thessalonica and who was a missionary colleague of Paul (Acts 20:4). He was also imprisoned for his faith as Paul states in Colossians 4:10: *My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas.* Undoubtedly these pioneering missionaries encouraged one another to keep going through the hard times in Christian service. Paul closes the letter with a brief benediction.

This letter is a personal one yet it is a powerful challenge to all its readers to examine our own attitudes, words and actions to see if we are living grace-filled lives. May God help us to live in this way for our good and for His glory Amen.