

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON - PERSUASION, VISION AND GENEROSITY

I. The introduction to the letter to Philemon, which consists of its first seven verses, sets up a friendly tone and indicates that Philemon and his family were prominent.

A. Unlike other letters, where St. Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ or a servant of Jesus Christ, here he introduces himself as a prisoner of Christ.

- The other captivity letters do not use this introduction despite the fact that it would have been true for them as well. Here, it seems that St. Paul is trying to set up the theme of relying on persuasion and compassion (here compassion for St. Paul in prison) as the motivation for generosity.

- Although it is the Romans who have imprisoned St. Paul, he considers his imprisonment to be for Christ, seeing a positive role in it.

- St. Timothy, a spiritual brother of St. Paul, is also involved in the letter although apparently not a dominant figure. St. Timothy, later a bishop to whom St. Paul writes, is a common collaborator of St. Paul, and is listed as a co-author of the captivity letters, and Second Corinthians and First and Second Thessalonians.

B. St. Paul addresses Philemon as a "beloved partner" emphasizing a desire to co-operate with him. It will become clear later that Philemon was brought to the faith by St. Paul, but here St. Paul addresses him as an equal.

C. The address is also to two other persons and the local church.

- The first person is Apphia, here referred to kindly as "our sister," and who is apparently Philemon's wife.

- The second person is Archippus, who is referred to as "our fellow soldier" a martial imagery not used elsewhere in the letter. (The letters to Ephesians and Thessalonians use more of this imagery. See Eph. 5:11-17; 1 Thess. 5:8.) Archippus may well be Philemon's son, who being a young man would likely be glad to be referred to as a soldier. Cf. 1 John 2:13-14.

- The letter is also addressed to the church in Philemon's house, indicating that the Christian community met in people's houses in that early era. Cf. Acts 12:12. Thus, the message here was not only the personal request to Philemon, but to the whole community. The fact that the letter was read to the whole church would have: (1) put some pressure on Philemon to do what St. Paul asks; and (2) helped to explain to the community why Philemon was treating a runaway slave well, and thus given an example to the community.

D. St. Paul then begins with a common introduction, asking that grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus be with them. At one level, the term grace and peace may be a combination of the more Greek greeting grace (charis) and the more Hebrew greeting peace (Shalom.) At another level, it may reflect the old priestly blessing of the Jews. See Num. 6:24-26. It expressing that we are favored by God's gift and thus at peace with Him and each other.

E. St. Paul then proceeds onto a thanksgiving, which indicates the prominence Philemon has.

1. St. Paul refers to Philemon's love and faith toward Jesus and "the holy ones." St. Paul commonly addresses his letters to "the holy ones" of an area, reflecting the universal call to holiness. Here, he emphasizes Philemon's leadership in bringing that holiness out. St. Paul, not surprisingly connects love of Jesus and love of neighbor. But he also seems to refer to a faith in not only Jesus but also in holy ones. St. Paul in this letter trusts Philemon, and here hints at Philemon's trust of others (possibly a trust that allowed Onesimus to escape.)

2. St. Paul also refers to his joy at Philemon both sharing his faith and encouraging others. In diplomatic fashion, he praises past accomplishments in asking for a favor.

3. St. Paul here refers to Philemon as a brother and to the common good they have. There is an effort to emphasize their unity, and thus that any gain to one is a gain to both.

II. In the next 13 verses, St. Paul then moves on to the main point, asking Philemon to release Onesimus, so that he can return to St. Paul.

A. In verses 8-10, St. Paul introduces the appeal for Onesimus in terms of love, rather than command.

1. He begins by saying he could use his power, but will not. St. Paul could be referring: (1) to his authority as a leader of

the church; (2) his moral authority as the one who brought the faith to Philemon; or (3) the ancient Jewish law according to which one of the faithful could not require service of another for more than seven years.

2. He makes the appeal, both as a prisoner like before and as a "presbytas" of Christ, which could be an elder or an ambassador. It is the same term that will later be used for an office in the church, now called priest, see, e.g., 1 Tim. 5:17-21, but here it seems to have a more informal meaning.

3. St. Paul refers to Onesimus as now his spiritual child. The idea is that St. Paul (and other evangelists) become spiritual fathers by bringing the life of faith to another. See 1 Cor. 4:15.

- It would seem that Philemon did not think to bring the faith to his slaves, although he had done so for his family and community. Or perhaps his presentation was not persuasive, given his treatment of the slaves.

B. St. Paul then engages in a double word play in making the point that Onesimus will become better even on a practical level if he is released.

1. The literal idea is that Onesimus was of only limited value as an unwilling slave. Perhaps his talents were not being used, which may have led to his flight. But now, he can be put to use in a glorious way for nothing less than the conversion of pagan lands, very possibly in Rome itself. In so doing, he will be of great use to Philemon in giving him the ability to participate in this evangelization and receive great merit, as well as showing thanks.

- It is noteworthy that we know of Philemon only because of his escaped slave.

2. There is also a play on words here. The name Onesimus literally means "The Profitable One." Here, St. Paul is saying that he will be really profitable if he is released for missionary work with St. Paul. It is a point that we become more who we are through the Church and the faith.

3. The term for useful and useless is also a play on words. The term for useful is "euchriston" and the term for useless "achriston," with christon, a word sounding similar to Christos, being the root. The point is that Onesimus did not seem like Christ to Philemon before the escape, but now will be as Christ to him. There is perhaps a reflection of the words of Jesus that how we treat the least of His brothers is how we treat Him. See Matt. 25:40, 45.

C. The next three verses give the poignant scene where St. Paul describes how dear and how valuable Onesimus is, but how he is sending him back all the same for the sake of appealing to Philemon's goodness

- Onesimus is presented as representing Philemon, serving on his behalf. The implications are: (1) Onesimus is apparently very talented and faithful to St. Paul; and (2) Philemon ought to participate in the ministry of St. Paul, and Onesimus is giving him the opportunity to do so vicariously.

D. In verses 15 and 16, St. Paul presents the entire event as beneficial to Philemon insofar as it will open up his eyes to the wisdom of God.

- Apparently, despite his desire to spread the faith, he has not been thinking of Onesimus as a brother in the faith. It has apparently not occurred to him that the faith would overcome such social barriers. Or perhaps, he has such a large estate that Onesimus was largely an anonymous figure.

- And so here St. Paul says that Onesimus' flight has been the opportunity to receive Onesimus back as a brother, which is much more than as a slave, both in value and in time, for a brother should be dearer and remain such forever.

E. St. Paul then concludes the request by identifying himself with Onesimus, now as in a sense St. Paul's ambassador.

- The implication is that, far from punishing Onesimus, Philemon should treat him as kindly as he would St. Paul. Doing so would likely be a struggle for Philemon, both because of his sense of injury and because of society's expectations that runaway slaves will be punished.

- St. Paul offers to make up for any injury Onesimus has caused, Philemon should consider it a debt of St. Paul. St. Paul may mean that he will repay it in funds, which would presumably come from the Church. But it is more likely that St. Paul means that Philemon could demand funds, but St. Paul expects him to seek a much greater reward.

- St. Paul does remind Philemon of how much Philemon owes him, and that returning Onesimus can be thought of as only a partial repayment. This generosity will be a delight to St. Paul, an additional benefit.

III. The last five verses then conclude with an optimistic note.

A. St. Paul expresses confidence that Philemon will do more than what is asked.

- At one level, the confidence is that Philemon will free Onesimus altogether. Strictly speaking, St. Paul has only requested that Philemon let Onesimus return to St. Paul to help him; if that is all Philemon did, he could have Onesimus back later on. However, if Philemon really thinks of Onesimus as a brother then he would presumably go further than St. Paul has requested and free him.
- St. Paul may also be hoping that Philemon will be even more generous and send more help than what is requested for the mission.
- St. Paul could also be hinting that Philemon should bring the gospel to his other slaves and then free them. Doing so would be a truly radical sacrifice and witness to the Gospel.

B. St. Paul then indicates that he hopes to come to Philemon's town (very possibly near Colossae) and stay at Philemon's house, something Philemon has apparently been praying for. It is not clear whether this visit ever occurred.

C. St. Paul then includes in his greetings people who are mostly the same as those at the end of the letter to the Colossians, leading many people to believe that the letters were written at about the same time and very possibly sent together.

- There is one difference insofar as Colossians includes greetings from a "Jesus who is called Justus," a name not in Philemon. However, he seems to have been a relatively minor figure.
- Colossians indicates that Epaphras was one of the Colossians and may have brought the faith there. See Col. 4:12.
- The fact that St. Mark is listed indicates that, although St. Paul did not include him in his second missionary journey, apparently thinking he was unreliable, the two were reconciled later. Cf. Acts 15:37-40.
- St. Luke, who with St. Mark would become St. Paul's most famous assistant, would write his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. According to tradition, after St. Paul's death, he would write the Gospel and Acts and minister in Greece,

eventually being martyred at the age of 84 in Boetia.

- The Demas mentioned here may be the same one as the Demas who later abandoned St. Paul for "love of the world." See 2 Tim. 4:10.
- Aristarchus was a Macedonian who lived in Thessalonica. He became a co-worker of St. Paul, was beaten in the riot of the silversmiths of Ephesus, but remained with St. Paul at least up to his imprisonment in Rome. See Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2; Col. 4:10.