

# LIBERTY, SACRIFICE AND SANCTITY

## SAINT PAUL'S LETTERS TO PHILEMON AND THE PHILIPPIANS - PART I

I. St. Paul's letters to Philemon and the Philippians are, with the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, called his "captivity letters." But with Philippians and Philemon, there is a more personal tone of friendship, persuasion, and voluntary generosity.

A. Like the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, these letters refer to St. Paul's imprisonment with a sense of calmness and union with Christ. They have, however, a more personal tone to them, emphasizing the friendship between St. Paul and the recipients.

1. The letter to the Philippians refers repeatedly to the union between St. Paul and that community, especially in their sufferings. See, e.g., Phil. 1:7-8, 29-30, 2:17-18, 4:2.
2. The letter to Philemon places great trust in him, especially in requesting but not commanding him to free the runaway slave Onesimus and let him return to St. Paul.
3. Both letters refer at length to generosity, thanking the Philippians for their generous gift, and calling upon Philemon to be generous. There is more of a calling to voluntary sacrifices than a list of commands in these letters.
4. Although there is some warning against both ritual legalism and moral laxity in the letter to the Philippians, see Phil. 3:1-4, 17-21, the letters are not as overtly doctrinal as are most of St. Paul's letters. They tend to refer more to St. Paul's own life, joys and struggles than other letters.

B. Both letters refer to a captivity, which could have been in Rome, Ephesus, or Corinth.

1. St. Paul was imprisoned several times, but the most extensive imprisonments were in Corinth around 54-55 A.D., Ephesus around 55-56 A.D., Caesarea around 59 A.D., and Rome in the early 60s. See Acts 18:12-17, 23:12-26, 32, 28:17-25; 1 Cor. 15:30-32.
2. Most scholars believe that the imprisonment in Caesarea, although lengthy, was unlikely to be the occasion for the letters because the letters refer to St. Paul's evangelization from his place in prison, and in that town there was little evangelization.

except St. Paul's attempt to convert the governors Festus and Felix themselves. Furthermore, the letter to the Philippians refers to Christians in "Caesar's household" and Philemon to Epephras being imprisoned with St. Paul, and it is unlikely that either of these references would apply to Caesarea.

3. The imprisonment in Corinth in about 54-55 A.D. is a possible location for the writing of both letters, but it is unlikely because: (1) there is little evidence of danger there, and St. Paul was probably not there long enough to have converts from Caesar's household, both of which are indicated by the letter to the Philippians; and (2) there was also apparently not enough time there to receive the slave Onesimus, release him, and then expect him back as the letter to Philemon indicates

4. Historically, Rome has been considered the most likely place for the letters because Acts of the Apostles refers to extensive evangelization and visitors for St. Paul there. In addition, the letter to the Philippians refers to the praetorium and to "Caesar's household." See Phil 1:14, 4:22.

5. Modern scholars have often focused on the imprisonment in Ephesus in the later 50s as the likely occasion for the letters. This imprisonment is not directly described in Acts of the Apostles, but the first letter to the Corinthians refers to fighting the "beasts" in Ephesus, a reference that is often taken to mean an imprisonment and threat of death there. See 1 Cor. 15:32; see also 2 Cor. 1:8-10 (referring to a threat of death, and apparently an imprisonment in Asia Minor, and somewhere other than Corinth.) St. Paul's expectation of continual correspondence and the proximity of Ephesus to Philippi and to Collossae, where Philemon apparently resided, makes this location a likely location.

II. The letter to the Philippians was an extension of thanks and encouragement to the first European community that St. Paul had evangelized.

A. Phillipi was a central city north of Greece that St. Paul had brought the Gospel to in his second missionary journey.

1. Philippi had been founded in 357-358 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, as a part of his increasing conquests. The Romans took over the city in 167 B.C. and made it a part of the province of Macedonia. In 42 B.C., it was given the special privileges of the Roman Empire usually reserved for Italian cities. And, in 31 B.C., it was the site of Mark Antony's defeat of Brutus and Cassius on behalf of the triumvirate of Mark Antony, Augustus and Lepidus, who had an agreement to divide the Roman Empire. After those events, many

Romans moved in, and by the first century, about half of the population was originally from Rome. Cf. Acts 16:21.

2. By the first century A.D., the city had become an important trade and cultural city. Its place along the Via Engatia, linking the Aegean and Adriatic Seas, its loyalty to and favor from Rome, and its placement as the entry to Macedonia by sea, gave it a great prominence.

3. St. Paul brought the Gospel there during his second missionary journey. See Acts 16:9-40. St. Lydia, a dealer in purple goods, and thus presumably a rather wealthy woman, helped them out a great deal, and gave St. Paul and his company hospitality in that city. See Acts 16:14-15, 40. There he preached with some success and expelled a demon from a fortune-telling girl. Because of local opposition, however, he was soon scourged and arrested. In prison, he converted the jailer by his refusal of an opportunity to escape and was soon released due to his Roman citizenship. He then proceeded further into Macedonia, but St. Luke apparently stayed behind, possibly due to the fact that Philippi was a medical center.

- St. Paul probably returned to Philippi as he passed through Macedonia at the beginning and end of his third missionary journey in the late 50s.

B. St. Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in large part to encourage the Philippians and thank them for their generosity in sending a gift by way of one Epaphroditus, who became very ill during the visit to St. Paul, but then recovered.

1. For the most part, the letter has a very optimistic tone, although there are warnings in chapter 3 against errors of both excessive adherence to the old Jewish ritual law and moral laxity, as well as a call in chapter 4 for two women to reconcile. The positive tone of the letters is reflected in the fact that the terms "joy" and "rejoice" occur 17 times in the four chapters.

2. Although the letter does not focus on doctrinal controversy, the Philippians hymn in chapter 2 is a glorious description of the Incarnation, the divine Son of God taking human nature.

- The hymn is meant above all else to show the way to glory through humility in imitation of Christ.

C. Due to the rapid changes in tone and some repetition, many scholars have argued that the current letter is a combination

of two or three letters.

1. In his own letter to the Philippians, St. Polycarp refers to the "letters" that St. Paul wrote to them, although some have argued that the plural of that term could mean a single letter. See Polycarp, Epistle to the Philippians, Ch. III.
2. The main arguments for the theory that the letter to the Philippians is a composite of three letters are: (1) the fact that the section from chapter 2, verse 19 to chapter 3, verse 1, reads like a conclusion of one of St. Paul's letters; (2) the section from chapter 3, verses 2 to 21, begins with a sudden harshness and has a very different tone than the rest of the letter; and (3) the reference to Epaphroditus and the farewell greeting are split in two, in chapters 2 and 4.
3. As a result, some have argued that there are three letters: (1) a full letter that is recorded in the first two chapters, and verse 1 of the third chapter; (2) the main part of a second letter, which comprises the rest of chapter 3 through chapter 4, verse 9; and (3) a third letter, which is recorded in the rest of chapter 4. The first letter would be an exhortation to imitate the humility and obedience of Christ, the second letter a warning against heresies, and the third letter a thanksgiving for the Philippians' gift. See Fr. Brendan Byrne, "The Letter to the Philippians" in ch. 48 of The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Others have argued that the letter combines two letters, with the middle section from chapter , verse 2 through chapter 4, verse 9 a letter inserted in the middle of the original one.

D. However, other scholars have argued that the letter can be seen as one whole. The idea is that either: (1) St. Paul was writing the letter in a more personal fashion, and thus did not attempt to organize it as systematically as his more theological letters; or (2) that there is a pattern, with St. Paul writing two parallel sections, with a theological and autobiographical comment in the middle.

- The idea behind the second approach is that there are three sections: (1) an encouragement to unity, humility, and joyful confidence in the first two chapters; (2) a warning against heresies in chapter 3; and (3) a reiteration in chapter 4 of this calling to unity, humility, and joy in worship as applied now to some specific situations regarding the church in Phillipi, in particular some individual personalities and the gift that the Philippians sent. See Peter Ellis, Seven Pauline Letters (1982) 115-117.

E. Although the letter is very personal, it has many universal applications, including the call to imitate Christ with joyful humility and to sense a calling in the Church to progress together in worship and service.

1. The theme of joyful humility runs throughout the letter. This theme is the focus of the hymn in chapter 2, which celebrates and calls for us to imitate the glory of Jesus Christ through His humility in becoming man, serving, and dying to our sins. See Phil. 2:5-11; see also Phil. 2:1-4, 12-18, 20-21, 3:13-16, 4:2. St. Paul says that even his own accomplishments are nothing compared to the knowledge of Christ. See Phil. 3:4-11.

2. In both his autobiographical references and his encouragement, St. Paul focuses on the joy that comes in the midst of suffering for Christ. See Phil. 1:18-24, 2:17-18, 4:6, 11-14.

3. There is a strong notion of recognizing the goodness of others, especially in the Church, but also taking on the world.

- The letter continually commends reflecting on the goodness where it is to be found, even in the midst of suffering, as a source of joy, and especially on seeing goodness in other members of the Church. See Phil. 1:9-11, 19-24, 2:3-4, 4:4-5, 8-9.

- On the other hand, there are warnings about the evil of the world, and calls to stand in dramatic contrast to it. See Phil 1:27-28, 2:14-15, 3:18-19.

4. The Philippians hymn in chapter 2 presumes that the people understand that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. It is not clear where the hymn, or poem, is from, but the Semitic phraseology makes it likely that St. Paul is translating a poem originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.

III. The letter to Philemon is a brief, personal appeal to generosity and the recognition of a runaway slave as a fellow brother in Christ.

A. Philemon appears to have been a fairly well off Christian very possibly living in the area around Collossae, or at least in the Lycus Valley, where Collossae was a city. His slave Onesimus had escaped and come to St. Paul.

1. The letter to the Colossians refers to Onesimus as one of that community. See Col. 4:9. If that Onesimus is the same person as the escaped slave, that reference would indicate that Philemon was part of the community as well. The fact that the letter to the Colossians does not mention Philemon in the greetings may indicate that he lived elsewhere in the Lycus Valley.
2. The letter is also addressed to Apphia and Archippus. Apphia would appear to be Philemon's wife, and it is likely that Archippus is his adult son. (Some people have argued that Onesimus was the slave of Archippus, not Philemon, and that Archimus was a friend, but not a relative, of Philemon.)
3. The fact that the church meets in Philemon's house, see Philemon 2, would indicate that he is a fairly prominent resident. There does not appear to be any evidence of a persecution of Christians at the time of the letter. The letter to the Colossians does indicate that the Christians did stand out there. See Col. 4:5-6.
4. The tone of the letter indicates that St. Paul had personally brought the faith to Philemon and that they were on very good terms. See Philemon 1, 17, 19-20.
5. It is not clear what type of person Onesimus was, but he seems to have been reasonably intelligent, for he probably knew of St. Paul's friendship with Philemon and was able to make his way to St. Paul; furthermore, St. Paul wanted him back to help him with evangelization.
  - The Onesimus of this letter may well have been the same one that St. Paul sent with the letter to Colossians. That letter may have been sent with the letter to Philemon, or at a later time. The commentary in Colossians (and Ephesians) about the relationships between slaves and master, encouraging dedication on the part of slaves and respect on the part of masters, may well have been inspired by Onesimus' escape.
  - St. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Ephesians around 107 A.D., speaks of an Onesimus who is the Bishop of Ephesus. Early Fathers of the Church and the Roman martyrology identify this bishop as the escaped slave in the letter to Philemon. The fact that Onesimus was a former slave would not have prevented him from being a bishop, for slaves were sometimes well educated.

B. The letter calls for a courageous sacrifice on the part of all involved.

1. Obviously, Onesimus must take the risk of the severe punishments that were usually doled out to escaped slaves in the Roman Empire, including mutilation or death.
2. Philemon is also called, not only to the sacrifice of giving up a slave, but also to the risk that other wealthy people in the community will ridicule him for so easily letting this slave, who had apparently stolen from him or caused other harm, now not only avoid punishment, but be freed. Philemon's behavior would mark him as someone fundamentally different from the rest of society.
3. St. Paul chooses not to use his authority as an apostle to insist that Philemon let Onesimus stay with him to continue his ministry. Furthermore, he does not invoke the ancient Jewish law to compel Philemon to release Onesimus. Jewish law forbade any servitude more than seven years, and also forbade returning an escaped slave of a foreigner to its owner. See Ex. 21:2-6; Lev. 25:39-43; Duet. 25:16-27. Instead, he relies on moral persuasion, enhanced perhaps by the fact that the letter is to be read in the whole church. See Philemon 2.

C. Although written for a very specific purpose, the letter to Philemon, has a general message to Christians throughout the ages.

1. First, there is the calling to think of all people as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of social status. That idea is in theory accepted widely, but actually dealing with others in poverty on a personal basis and really acting in a fashion that reflects the equality of employer and employee is often difficult.
2. St. Paul emphasizes the call to go beyond what is required by law and make voluntary sacrifices, even and especially those that contradict social norms, out of a sense of gratitude and for the gospel.
3. The letter gives an example of leadership through persuasion, rather than force. There are times, as with the letters to the Corinthians and Galatians, when one must simply lay down the law. But there are other times when persuasion is the better approach.
4. With regard to slavery, the letter does not overtly condemn it, but as with the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, establishes the equality in Christ of all people. This letter in particular emphasizes that it is better for Philemon to have Onesimus as a brother than a slave. Those general principles would lead to a general opposition to slavery, first among



Christians, and then universally.

- This sort of issue is a classic example of the Bible being central to Christian tenets, but not being the limit of them. The teachings of the faith grow throughout time and space in a fashion consistent with the past.