



The Lighthouse

NEW TESTAMENT NOTES

Philemon

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Introduction to the Letter of Paul to Philemon



Background: Some years prior to this, Paul had founded the congregation at Ephesus (Acts 19). Ephesus was Paul’s base of operation from which he preached the gospel to all who were in the province of Asia (Acts 19:10), which is now located in south west modern Turkey (see map). Hence, the seven churches of Asia were founded by Paul (Rev. 2-3). When he writes the Colossians, he tells them to let the congregation at Laodicea read their letter, and for them to read the letter he sent to Laodicea (Col. 4:16) which is now lost. He also mentions congregations at “*Hierapolis*” (Col. 4:13). The very content and manner in which the letter is written demonstrates there was an already established close relationship between Paul and Philemon. There is a freedom of expression in this letter that could only be explained by a very close relationship. This relationship was established when Paul preached at Colossae and Philemon was saved, as Colossae was the home of both Philemon and Onesimus (Col. 4:9, 12). Philemon was a wealthy man who owned at least one slave and most likely had a large estate or house where the congregation at Colossae met for worship (v. 2). Onesimus whose name means *useful* was a runaway slave from the house of Philemon. Like many runaway slaves, he fled to Rome to get lost in the crowds. As providence would have it, Onesimus met Paul and was saved. Although Paul enjoyed having Onesimus with him in Rome, he knew that what he had done had to be resolved. Onesimus had broken Roman law concerning slaves, and no doubt had stolen

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money (v. 17) when he escaped. Paul sends him back with Tychicus (Col. 4:7-9) who delivers a letter to the congregation at Colossae. Slavery, like polygamy was rampant in the ancient world. The Scriptures rejected both and provided principles that would gradually eradicate both.

Theme: The theme that stands out in this little letter is the example of substitutionary atonement. Paul asks Philemon to impute all his debts to Paul's account, and Paul promises to pay his debt in full and then asks Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were Paul. This is an illustration of what Christ did on a much greater and grandeur scale for His elect. All our debts were imputed to Christ's account and now the Father treats us as if we were His own Son. This entire letter is also a demonstration of great tact in dealing with what could have been a potential problem. Paul the aged and elder statesmen expresses great tact and wisdom in securing the best possible reception for his new son in the faith, Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon. The slave of a man runs away only to become the slave of God and servant of all men. Paul's request to treat Onesimus as if he were actually Paul, secures the very best possible reception and treatment from Philemon. What supreme wisdom in requesting Philemon, who was indebted to Paul for his own salvation, to charge to his own account the debt of Onesimus. More tact is seen in making the letter inclusive of the leadership and the congregation where Philemon attended and Onesimus would attend.

Date: He describes himself as a "*prisoner*" of the Lord (v. 1). This was written at the same time as the book of Colossians during his first imprisonment in Rome A.D. 61-63.

Writer: The letter claims to be written by Paul's own hand (v. 19). The letter is addressed from both Paul and Timothy (v. 1). Most of Paul's letters were probably the result of discussions between Paul and those who ministered with him. There is wisdom in a multitude of counselors. Timothy would seem to be in collaboration with Paul in writing this letter.

Audience: Paul is directly writing a wealthy member of the congregation at Colossae whose name is Philemon. Onesimus is described as "*one of them*" that dwelt in Colossae (Col. 4:9) and the same persons he asks Philemon to salute are members and ministers in the congregation at Colossae (Col. 4:12; Phil. 23-24). Paul describes some as "*fellowlaborers*" (vv. 1, 24) and another as a "*fellowsoldier*" (v. 2) and one as a "*fellowprisoner*" (v. 23) and others as "*beloved*" (vv. 1-2). Those addressed as "*fellowlaborers*" had been on the mission field with Paul (Acts 12:21; 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; 2 Tim. 4:11) and therefore were ministers of the gospel. Archippus was called the "*fellowsoldier*" who must have been a strong defender of the faith. Epaphras was called the "*fellowprisoner*" who had been with Paul in Rome and no doubt had been imprisoned with Paul, and seemed to be the pastor of the congregation (Col. 1:17; 4:12).

Outline

Greetings – vv. 1-3

A. Paul's Rejoicing – vv. 4-7

B. Paul's Request – vv. 8-17

C. Paul's Repayment – vv. 18-20

D. Paul's Return – v. 21

E. Paul's Recognition – v. 22-25

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The Letter to Philemon

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother,¹ unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow labourer,

2 And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the congregation in thy house: ²

3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,

5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; ³

6 That the communication of thy faith⁴ may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin [to place under obligation] thee that which is convenient, [fitting, and proper]

9 Yet for love's sake⁵ I rather beseech [urgently request] *thee*, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: ⁶

¹ “**Our brother**” – The Greek term translated “*brother*” (*adelphos*) means one from the same womb. He is called “*the brother*” known to all the congregations (2 Cor. 8:18). Paul uses it in the sense of “kindred spirit.”

² “**Congregation in thy house**” – The congregation at Colossae was small enough to meet in the house of Philemon. The earliest record of any building called a “church” is not until the third century.

³ “**Toward all saints**” – Every child of God is called a “*saint*” or one set apart to God. The Roman Catholic concept of a “*saint*” as someone canonized after their death is wholly unbiblical. “*Saints*” dwell on earth (Acts 9:32; 26:10; Rom. 15:25; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Philip. 1:1; Col. 1:2). Money can be collected from saints (1 Cor. 16:1). There were saints in Caesar’s household (Philip. 4:22). Widows can wash the feet of saints (1 Tim. 5:10).

⁴ “**The communication of thy faith**” - Philemon voiced his faith and communicated it to others. Paul prays that God would make that communication “*effectual*” in others, as well as anything else wrought in and through him by Christ to others. Paul knew the preached word alone saved no one, but it must be accompanied in power, and in the Spirit in order for it to be effectual to salvation (1 Thes. 1:5).

⁵ “**For love’s sake**” – Obedience to a command is good. However, obedience motivated out of love is better. The only pressure that Paul wanted to put on Philemon was the pressure that his own heart would motivate him to do. This is the key to leadership - motivating obedience from the heart.

⁶ “**My son...begotten in my bonds**” – No one ever addressed Paul as “Father” in a spiritual sense, nor did he ever demand or expect that. The New Testament knows of no titles as “father, priest, Cardinal, Pope, Arch Bishop, Your holiness, etc.) given to the leaders in New Testament congregations. He only claimed to be instrumental in the hands of God in the salvation of those under his ministry (1 Cor. 4:15). Evidently, Onesimus was saved under the ministry of Paul at Rome. Since Paul was under house arrest (Acts 28:16, 30), and only could receive those who sought him out, therefore, Onesimus must have sought to be received by Paul while in Rome. Perhaps, he had remembered Paul’s ministry to Philemon in his home and needed help in a strange place.

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11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:⁷

12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels [heartfelt emotions]:

13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind [consent] would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season [period of time], that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved,⁸ specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth *thee* ought, put that on mine account;⁹

19 I Paul have written *it* with mine own hand, I will repay *it*: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.

20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh [to ease] my bowels [heartfelt emotions] in the Lord.

21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.¹⁰

23 There salute [greet] thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;

⁷ “**Profitable**” – The meaning of “*Onesimus*” is “useful.” God had made him more useful to Philemon by saving him.

⁸ “**Above a servant, a beloved brother**” – New Testament Christianity always improves a culture. Wherever, Biblical Christianity has gone the culture has improved. Christianity lifted up women and slaves from cultural oppression. Wherever light goes it expels darkness.

⁹ “**Put that on mine account**” - Paul is entreating Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were Paul (see verse 17) and consider any debt Onesimus owed to Philemon to be charged to Paul’s account. Here we have a beautiful illustration of the doctrine of substitution and imputation. God treats sinners as though they were Christ and their sins have been charged to Christ’s account.

¹⁰ “**I shall be given unto you**” – Paul had ministered in and around Ephesus years prior to this letter and that is where he must have first met Philemon, a resident of Colossae (Col. 4:12, 17). There is no question that Paul evangelized more than Ephesus but “*all Asia*” (the province of Asia in Turkey). “*And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.*” – Acts 19:10. He particular mentions the congregation at “*Laodicea*” (Col. 4:16) and at “*Hierapolis*” (Col. 4:13). Hence, the seven churches of Asia were founded by the apostle Paul (Rev. 2-3).

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24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.¹¹

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit.¹² Amen.

¹¹ “**My fellowlabourers**” – Colossians 4:10-15 show these were with Paul in Rome when this letter was sent by the hand of Tychicus and Onesimus. By the time 2 Timothy 4:9-12 Demas had forsaken him and Mark and Lucas were no longer with him and Tychicus had been sent to Ephesus. Epaphras was from Colossae (Col. 4:12), while Aristichus was from Macedonia (Acts 19:29). All of these preachers were sent out from their own particular congregation (2 Cor. 8:23-24). This was not a centralized co-operation program as in the Southern Baptist Convention. This was the result of independent congregations working cooperatively together.

¹² “**With your spirit**” – What has been born of God is our “*spirit*” (Jn. 3:6). It has been reunited with God spiritually through new birth. It has been created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) and cleansed from all defilement of sin and from demonic presence (Eph. 2:2-3). However, this new inward man that is completely and fully glorified has no power to carry out its new inclinations (Rom. 7:18-20). Only by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God are the delights of the regenerated spirit are made effectual in our daily life. Hence, the “*grace of God*” determines what is ultimately worked in the child of God “*both to will and to do of His good pleasure*” (Philip. 2:13).