

## PHILEMON

The letter to Philemon is the shortest of the Pauline epistles. It is addressed, not to a church, although a church is mentioned, but to a person, Philemon. As such it differs greatly from the epistles Paul must have written approximately at the same time, (Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians). But it is also different from other letters, written to persons, such as the ones to Timothy and Titus, in that this one does not deal with church matters. The purpose of the letter was a request regarding Onesimus. It was, in a certain way, a letter of recommendation. But as such it is extremely interesting and full of the most beautiful and intriguing thoughts.

### PLACE AND TIME OF WRITING

It was obviously written from a prison. Paul introduces himself as “a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” That this is not simply spiritualization, indicating his subjection to the ministry of the Gospel, is obvious from frequent reference in the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, where he speaks about his chains, which he wears for the sake of the Gospel.

So we may presume that the letter to Philemon was written approximately at the same time as the other three and from the same place. What we said in our study of the Philippian letter, regarding the place of his imprisonment, applies to this one also. Some commentators may say that Paul was in prison in Ephesus, but we believe with many others that the prison was in Rome.

From a reference to Onesimus in Colossians<sup>1</sup> we conclude that the epistle to Philemon was written before the one to Colosse. We are under the impression that Paul had received a reply by the time he wrote to the Colossians. (He {Tychicus} is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.)

### DIVISION OF THE LETTER

The division of this small letter is rather simple. *The Tyndale Commentary* gives the following outline:

#### I. INTRODUCTION (1-7)

- a. Salutation (1-3)
- b. Thanksgiving (4-7)

#### II. THE REQUEST (8-21)

- a. Paul's personal interest in Onesimus (8-14)
- b. Paul's plea for Onesimus (15 -21)

#### III. CONCLUSION (22-25)

- a. Paul's proposed visit (22)
- b. Greetings (23-25)

#### I. INTRODUCTION (1-7)

- a. Salutation (1-3)

***Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

When Paul calls himself “a prisoner of Jesus Christ,” he says more than that he is in prison because of the Gospel. He sees in his outward circumstances, that is his imprisonment, an image of his spiritual condition. He may seem to be a prisoner of the Roman government, but in reality he is a prisoner of Christ. I have never heard this put so beautifully as in the testimony of Joni Eareckson, the paraplegic, who spends her life in a wheelchair after breaking her neck in a diving accident. She said once that she understood that her dependence upon help by fellow humans, who feed and bath and dress her, has taught her what Jesus' words

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<sup>1</sup> Col.4:9

mean, "Apart from Me you can do nothing!" We read in John's Gospel: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."<sup>2</sup> This is true for each child of God. But people who are able to move around on their own steam have a tendency to forget the most important truth of their live. Paul doesn't only state that he is in prison, he tells us what he learned from it.

This paradox is the greatest freedom for the human soul. Nobody is so free as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. There is a great hymn that puts this in a beautiful way:<sup>3</sup>

#### MAKE ME A CAPTIVE, LORD.

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.  
I sink in life's alarms, when by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms, and strong shall be my hand.

My heart is weak and poor until its master find;  
It has no spring of action sure-- it varies with the wind.  
It cannot freely move till Thou hast wrought its chain;  
Enslave it with Thy matchless love, and deathless it shall reign.

My power is faint and low till I have learned to serve;  
It wants the needed fire to glow; it wants the breeze to nerve;  
It cannot drive the word until itself be driven;  
Its flag can only be unfurled when Thou shalt breathe from heaven.

My will is not my own till Thou has made it Thine;  
If it would reach a monarch's throne, It must its crown resign;  
It only stands unbent amid the clashing strife,  
When on Thy bosom it has leant and found in Thee its life.<sup>4</sup>

Paul's experiences are extremes. Not all of us are in prison. But we should consider ourselves the Lord's prisoners in all circumstances. Sometimes it is easier to see this reality when we are a prisoner of human authority also.

Being "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" did in no way diminish Paul's fruitfulness. This epistle bears witness to this. After all, Onesimus, who is the subject of the letter, was won to the Lord by Paul, while he was in prison. See vs. 10 "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds"(KJV). It is when we are prisoners of Jesus Christ that we bear much fruit.

The letter is addressed to Philemon who, evidently, had been Onesimus' master. His name is only found in the first verse of this epistle. We know nothing about him, except for what we learn in this letter. He was Paul's convert, according to vs. 19 "not to mention that you owe me your very self." And since Onesimus originated from Colosse,<sup>5</sup> we may suppose that Philemon lived there also. Some commentaries suggest that Aristarchus was the pastor of the church there and that Apphia was his wife. Although this is probable, it is hard to prove. It is even harder to prove, what some presume, that Philemon was their son.

Paul calls Philemon his "dear friend and fellow worker." KJV: "our dearly beloved and fellow-laborer." RSV puts it more simply: "our beloved fellow worker." This shows a deep personal relationship and also a bond of the same profession. In view of this appellation, it would seem more reasonable to presume that Philemon was the leader of the Colossian church and not Archippus. It also seems probable that Philemon was one of Paul's converts from the time he spent in Ephesus. In Acts, Luke mentions this period: "... So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussion daily in the lecture hall of

<sup>2</sup> John 15:5

<sup>3</sup> No. 23 8 in the Hymns of the Christian Life

<sup>4</sup> George Matheson, 1842-1906

<sup>5</sup> See Col. 4:9

Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

The greetings in vs. 3 are directed to Philemon and the whole church, which includes Apphia and Archippus. Apphia is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament. We find Archippus in Colossians, where Paul admonishes him concerning his work: “Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.’”<sup>7</sup> It is on the basis of this verse that most commentators believe that Archippus was actually the pastor of the Colossian church. But “the work you have received in the Lord” could imply other things too. There is no hint of reproach to the address of Archippus in this epistle, which reinforces our impression that this letter precedes the one written to the Colossian church. Paul must have had more information, both concerning Onesimus and about Archippus, when he wrote the epistle to the Colossians.

Paul’s greeting in this verse is identical with the one to the Philippian church and almost the same as to the church in Colosse, where the part ‘and the Lord Jesus Christ’ is omitted. This has since it is a typical Pauline combination of the Greek *charis* and the Hebrew *shalom*, there is probably no significance.

#### b. Thanksgiving (4-7)

***I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.***

Also the continuation after the greeting resembles both the epistles to the Philippian church and to the Colossians. To Philemon Paul says: “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers”; to the Philippians: “I thank my God every time I remember you”; and to the Colossians: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.” This could be another indication that all three epistles were written during the same period.

There is always enough reason to thank God for fellow believers, even if there are still things that need to be worked on in their lives. This is not the case in the letter to Philemon. There is in this epistle no hint that there are attitudes to be changed or false doctrines to be corrected. Paul demonstrates genuine personal love and also a very tactful approach. He respects Philemon as a person. He does not force any decisions upon him. There are hints of suggestions but Paul, evidently, leans upon the Holy Spirit to show his friend what to do.

This is a very healthy way of maintaining personal relations. It seems that others always know better how a person should act than the person himself knows. In some cases that may be true. But this does not mean that it is always our task to go and tell him. Even if we are in a position of authority over the other person, there is the danger that what is a speck in someone’s eye appears as a plank in ours.<sup>8</sup> And nothing is more convincing than the conviction by the Holy Spirit. It is a very human reaction to rebel against advice by others. In the “Rettungsarche,”<sup>9</sup> in Möttlingen, Germany, one of the visitors complained about a Dutch pastor, who was smoking a cigar. The serving brother answered him: “The Holy Spirit will tell him!” Why do we think we can do a better job?

In Colossians, Paul mentioned that he had heard of the faith of the church and their love for all the saints.<sup>10</sup> What he says to the church in general, he says here to Philemon personally. Paul had led him to Christ and his faith had demonstrated itself in a deep love for fellow human beings, especially those who shared in Christ’s love. The love of God in and through us is the best proof of our conversion and recommendation for the Gospel. But silent love is not enough.

From vs.6, we get the impression that Philemon was a shy person who had to step over a threshold to witness to others. Paul prays specifically for him that he “may be active in sharing [his] faith.” At least that is the way the NIV interprets this verse. The Greek is, evidently, open for more than one interpretation. The way we read it here, our witnessing stimulates our understanding of the truth. The riches of Christ become more real to us as we share them with others.

<sup>6</sup> Acts. 19:9,10

<sup>7</sup> Col. 4:17

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 7:1-5

<sup>9</sup> German for “Arc of Salvation”

<sup>10</sup> Col. 1:4

There is a way in which we can burn ourselves out if we always give and never receive. The emphasis of our life should be on our relationship with God, not on our witnessing to others; but this does not mean that we should not witness. Witness we will, if we are constantly being filled in fellowship with our Lord. If we are not, what do we have to give? There is no blessing in ourselves that we can give. Goodness and love will follow us all the days of our life, only if we dwell in the house of the LORD forever.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently it works both ways. Fellowship with God will increase the effectiveness of our witness and our witness will deepen our fellowship with God. We become more aware of our riches as we give them away. We discover that the supply never ends.

Vs.7 shows that Philemon had the gift of encouragement toward fellow believers. The witnessing of his faith would have been what he did to unbelievers, but the refreshing of the hearts of the saints describes what he meant to the church. So Paul complements him on this gift and suggests that he work on the other one, which seems to be less developed. There is a poetical expression of Philemon's character in one of the psalms: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. (Selah) Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs."<sup>12</sup> The valley of Baca is the place of weeping and dryness. It takes dwelling in the house of the LORD and having our strength in Him, to make Baca into a place of springs.

In this verse, we see a typical example that the language of the KJV is no longer useful to convey the message to modern man. The average twentieth century English speaking person would give a medical connotation to "the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother!"

This brings us to the second part of our outline:

## II. THE REQUEST (8-21)

### a. Paul's personal interest in Onesimus (8-14)

*Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul- an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him- who is my very heart- back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.*

Obviously the first part of this letter was not just an effort by Paul to pamper Philemon and make him ready for the following request. Paul's appreciation of his brother was genuine and sincere. But the introduction does lead to the request. If Philemon's specific gift was to refresh the hearts of the saints, Paul sends him another saint, Onesimus.

There is no lack of humor in these verses. We can see the twinkle in Paul's eyes. Paul could have been an Englishman in the way he takes his humor seriously. This letter could have contained an order, but instead it is a request. The hint of the authority of the apostle does put teeth into the request though. Paul knows that honey is a more effective means to catch flies than is vinegar.

The basis of Paul's authority is, first of all, the fact that Philemon owes his salvation to Paul's ministry. This we learn from vs. 19 "not to mention that you owe me your very self." As we have seen already, Philemon was probably a convert from Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Then there is the fact that Paul was the apostle who had the responsibility for the churches that were the fruit of his labor, either directly or indirectly, the Colossian church being one of the indirect fruits. His authority is ultimately that which is delegated by the Lord Jesus Christ.

But Paul prefers persuasion by love instead of obedience by order. After all, he was talking about Philemon's private possession. Onesimus was still Philemon's slave. The fact that our opinion of slavery differs from that of first century Christians does not change this. We may not agree with the law but that

<sup>11</sup> Ps. 23:6

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 84:4-7

doesn't mean that it is not a law. The matter was a delicate one, to say the least. We learn from Paul's approach that in delicate matters persuasion through love is the best way.

Secondly, Paul uses his own condition as a leverage. He calls himself "an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." "Old man" is a translation of the Greek *presbyter*. That is why the RSV translates it with 'ambassador,' which would put the stress on authority, more than on difficult circumstances. It seems to me that 'old man' fits better in the context of the argument. Paul says: "I am suffering and I am not that young any more." It is not often Paul appeals to people's pity. But the cause needs all the help it can get, so the appeal is made "for love's sake," and "for pity's sake."

Now comes the beautiful part in vs. 10. Somehow Onesimus met Paul in prison. Whether he was imprisoned temporarily himself or not, we do not know. There is no indication how he got there. Obviously, when Paul writes, Onesimus is no longer in prison; otherwise there would be no question about his being sent back to Colosse. It could be that as a run-away slave, he had been picked up by the authorities and incarcerated for a few days. Anyhow, he met Paul, and Paul led him to Jesus Christ.

Here the KJV adds beauty to the scene by saying: "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds." If conversion is a new birth, as Jesus calls it in John, then the person who is instrumental is the spiritual father. Here again there is a touch of humor in the way Paul puts it. While in prison, he became a father. Physical chains are no limitation to spiritual fruitfulness; not even old age. Remember that Paul just called himself "an old man and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

How many people Paul led to the Lord while in prison, we don't know. From Philippians, we understand that the guards, who were chained to him in prison without a chance to escape, were given the Gospel. "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."<sup>13</sup>

So Onesimus found the freedom he had hoped for when he ran away from his master in prison. He discovered the truth of the hymn Paul knew already: "Make me a captive, LORD and then I shall be free... My will is not my own till Thou hast made it free. It cannot freely move till Thou hast wrought its chain."

He also experienced what Paul says in Corinthians: "For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman."<sup>14</sup>

The name Onesimus means "useful" in Greek. That is why Paul enters into the following play of words in vs. 11 "Formerly he was useless *achreios* to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me." It was not until Onesimus was found by Christ that he really became *Onesimon*. It is a general principle that we become useful in Christ, only when we find our identity in Him. The verse also gives biblical sanction to punning! I love that. Although true Paul's play on words is not really a pun. The genuine pun is stated by Jesus in Matthew: "And I tell you that you are Peter, (*Petros*) and on this rock (*Petra*) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."<sup>15</sup>

Now we come to the core of this letter. What happens to a human being when he becomes a new creature in Christ? What happens to his human relations and to his social position? How does it influence his perception of reality?

Onesimus rediscovered that he was a slave of Philemon. That is, he knew this before, but he had denied this reality by running away. It is a fundamental truth that being in Christ means that we start out by accepting what we are, where we are. Onesimus' position was open for change. Being a slave is less than ideal, but Paul taught him that one of the first lessons is to leave the changes up to the Lord. We do not even know if Onesimus ever received his freedom from Philemon. He probably did, but there is no proof of this in the Bible. His return to his master proves that he accepted his position, even if he would never be set free. Once again, that is the place to start.

God told Job to pray for his friends, the ones who had added to his suffering, before there was any change in his condition. He was still sick and poor when he prayed. We read: "And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before."<sup>16</sup> The KJV is definitely more vivid at this point.

This kind of realism is the first result of our entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Many Christians go astray at the beginning because they want to see change. The change is a change of heart, not of outward

<sup>13</sup> Phil. 1:12,13

<sup>14</sup> I Cor. 7:22

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 16:18

<sup>16</sup> Job 42:10 (KJV)

conditions. This is no denial of the necessity of social improvement. It shows us where to start. Jesus' words in Matthew penetrate to the heart of the matter: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt in my mind that God wants us to be free of bondage, sickness, and poverty. He loves us, more than any human being ever will. As Jesus said: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"<sup>18</sup> God will bring about the change that is good for us, if we let Him.

So Paul sends Onesimus back to the beginning. Returning to the place from which we ran away is the first thing we have to do after our conversion. Obviously, Onesimus accepted Paul's advice. He could have run away again. The fact that we have this epistle in the Bible is proof that he did not. He goes back to his master by his own free will. He is obeying God, not Paul, in doing so.

As we said before, we deduct from the mention of Onesimus in Colossians that Philemon set him free and allowed him to return to Paul. Also the sections in both Ephesians and Colossians that deal with the relationship between slaves, and masters, may have been inspired by the conversion of Onesimus.<sup>19</sup>

Nowhere in his epistles does Paul address the issue of slavery. But as we mentioned in connection with Eph. 6 and Col. 3, he planted the seed that eventually led to the abolishment of slavery nineteen centuries later. Slavery is one of the most disgusting results of man's fall into sin. This is where dominion of one human being over another started. It began in the relationship between Adam and Eve. After Eve sinned, God said to her: "your husband, and he will rule over you."<sup>20</sup> Man has tried to rule over man ever since, even to the point of one enslaving the other. The solution is not only abolition, but recognition of the image of God in each other.

And there is no question as to whether or not Paul intended Philemon to recognize Jesus Christ in Onesimus. It would have been impossible for Paul to be blind to the horror of slavery under the Roman Empire. But then slavery was only part of the baseness of that society. We cannot judge Paul's time in the light of our twenty-first century perspective, nor can we blame Paul for his "lack of insight" in the matter. He fully understood the core of the problem, and that is clearly expounded in this epistle. Philemon had lost a slave and won a brother.

Paul calls Onesimus "my very heart," "useful to (you and to) me." He would have liked to keep him as a reminder of Philemon himself, and he asks Philemon to receive his old slave as he would the apostle. So Onesimus is pictured as representing both Philemon and Paul. This playful way with words is typically Pauline.

"My very heart" testifies of Paul's genuine love for his new son in Christ. There is no question of any difference in social status. Paul practices what he preached in Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."<sup>21</sup> There is no hint of discrimination of any kind in Jesus Christ. Love and discrimination are incompatible.

What a joy it must have been for Paul, under the most miserable circumstances in prison, to lead this man to Christ. He must have seen it as a sign of God's smile upon his life. And the fact that Onesimus is willing to go back to Philemon and to make good what he had done wrong was proof of the genuineness of his conversion. The greatest joy a person can experience in life, next to his own experience of being born again, is to bring someone else to the point of accepting new life in Christ. For Paul to "beget a son in his bonds" meant that the Gospel could not be chained. He reminds Timothy at another occasion of this truth when he says: [The Gospel] "For which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained."<sup>22</sup>

Vs. 13 is full of subtle hints. There is the hint that Paul needs help in prison. In the severe limitations of his freedom, he needs someone to do his errands, but more than that he longed for some human fellowship. There is true incongruity between his imprisonment and the Gospel of freedom for which he is in prison. Paul lives in a world that is upside down, and he needs some reminders of which side is up. Philemon's love and help would have provided such a reminder. The great Apostle was human, very human. We have no idea if Philemon would have been willing to serve as Paul's valet in prison. Paul's suggestion may have caused a good bit of soul searching for Philemon. Living in relative comfort, as most of us do, we

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 16:26

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 7:11

<sup>19</sup> See Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 3:16

<sup>21</sup> Gal. 3:28

<sup>22</sup> II Tim. 2:9

have to remind ourselves often of the admonition of the writer to the Hebrews: “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”<sup>23</sup>

There is another subtlety in vs. 14. How do you suggest spontaneity to someone? Paul’s suggestion of what Philemon should have done presupposes that he would have done this, had he only known. It is true that Philemon did not know what happened; in fact, he could not have known before he received Paul’s letter. But this does not necessarily mean that his reaction would have been to cede Onesimus to Paul. That is where Paul’s tact comes in. Paul shows in a very refined way what Philemon should have done, so that in the future when similar decisions are called for, he will act accordingly. Paul’s hints contain the seeds that will make Philemon a better Christian. Paul’s approach is not devoid of ruse, but there is nothing reprehensible about it. As a matter of fact we can learn a lot from him in our dealing with younger Christians.

b. Paul’s plea for Onesimus (15-21)

***Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- 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 man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand I will pay it back-- not to mention that you owe me your very self I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.***

Paul’s use of words throughout this whole epistle is a masterpiece of diplomacy. He avoids terms that are harsh and would excite strong reactions. There is no doubt that Onesimus ran away from Philemon, probably after stealing some of his master’s possessions. Paul calls this separation.” Onesimus’ flight was an unlawful and willful act. But Paul suggests a divine reason behind this. Things do not just happen on the basis of our decision alone. And wrong decisions do not always lead to wrong results. This does not justify our mistakes, but it makes us realize “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”<sup>24</sup> Or as the KJV puts it: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.”

There are some parallels between this story and Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. He ran away from home too, and his father welcomed him back in a way in which he was never able to fellowship with the oldest son. There is nothing glorious in our sin and failure. But once we repent, that repentance surely adds a sparkle to our salvation. Experiences like these make us marvel at the fact that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him. It is the love of God that makes the difference.

By putting it this way, Paul makes a plea for forgiveness for his son Onesimus. If Philemon realizes God’s purpose in the “separation,” how could he punish his slave? There can only be joy in the fact that he, who ran away as a slave, came back as a brother. In the Old Testament slaves were not permanently slaves in the nation of Israel. They had to be released, either at the Year of Jubilee, or after a period of seven years. In the heathen world this rule did not apply, of course. But even a heathen knew that his slave would only be his possession for this life. Speaking about death Job says: “There the wicked cease from turmoil, and there the weary are at rest. Captives also enjoy their ease; they no longer hear the slave driver’s shout. The small and the great are there, and the slave is freed from his master.”<sup>25</sup> Like all possessions slaves are transient, but brothers are forever. Death does not part us.

Paul drives his point home forcefully in vs. 16. In the Roman world slaves were not considered to have

souls. As a Christian, Philemon had probably changed his mind already on this subject. But Paul wanted him to realize that the master should recognize the slave as a person, that is as a fellow human being, a brother, both in the natural sense of the words as well as in the spiritual.

“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 man and as a brother in the Lord.” The words “no longer as a slave” can hardly be misunderstood. Paul strongly suggests that Philemon grant freedom to Onesimus. But the verse does not

<sup>23</sup> Heb. 13:3

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 8:28

<sup>25</sup> Job 3:17-19

contain an order. The whole tone of the letter is suggestive, not commanding. Even God does not command us in such a way that He forces us to do His will. He respects our freedom of choice as part of our personality. Even after we have surrendered our will to Him, we will never be forced into action. Sometimes we wished He would force us. The Holy Spirit convicts and leads, but He does not coerce. The basic principle behind this is love. God desires that we make our decisions on the basis of our love for Him. Any act that is not motivated by love has no value. If Philemon understands that he is to love Onesimus for Christ's sake, he will no longer be the master of a slave, but a brother in Christ. At that point, physical freedom or bondage becomes irrelevant.

All this is reinforced by Paul's request that Philemon would receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself. Vs. 17 – "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me." This relates to vs.22-- "And one thing more: Prepare a guestroom for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers." This quotation shows us how Paul expects Philemon to treat his former slave! Also, it sounds ironic that Paul asks to be considered as a partner by Philemon. The latter would no doubt feel very honored himself to be considered as such by Paul. Although there is diplomacy in the way Paul puts it, there is also an application of what he teaches in Philippians: "in humility consider others better than yourselves."<sup>26</sup>

As we mentioned before, it is probable that Onesimus stole from Philemon when he fled. We deduct this from vs. 18. We would be of the opinion that, as a proof of the genuineness of his conversion, Onesimus should make every effort to make restitution himself. But as he was a poor slave, it could be supposed that Philemon, in granting him freedom, would also forgive him his debt. The likelihood that Philemon would take Paul up on his offer to charge him personally for Onesimus' debt is even smaller. The fact that Paul's signature in this letter makes this an IOU does not change this. And even more, immediately after offering to pay, Paul reminds Philemon of his much greater debt to Paul. This debt can never be repaid in money. Vs. 19 says: "not to mention that you owe me your very self."

Jesus says: "...what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"<sup>27</sup> Not only can we not obtain salvation through any kind of payment, but also we will never be able to pay back our salvation. David said: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"<sup>28</sup>

Yet we should not suppose that Paul is only talking in jest about financial matters. He puts finances in their right perspective. In comparison with spiritual matters, money should be the least of our worries. It often is the greatest! As Christians, we are not allowed to worry, or to treat finances irresponsibly. We should always make a point of paying our debts promptly. It has been said that a Christian can always afford to pay. King Amaziah was concerned about money he paid for hiring troops and he asked a prophet, "But what about the hundred talents I paid for these Israelite troops?" The man of God replied, "The LORD can give you much more than that."<sup>29</sup> He does not always give us much more, but He can if we really need it.

There is no hint of Paul trying to coerce Philemon, as if he can not really charge Paul, because he is Paul's convert. Paul does not remind him of his conversion to get a handle on him, but for the sake of joy. The joy at the moment of conversion and new birth can be overwhelming, but it is a fading entity. Joy does not last in its full intensity. Therefore, it is good, for all of us, to be reminded to go back to that moment and to taste again some of the exuberance and excitement. Paul feels he needs this refreshing, and Philemon will need it also. It is good to remember where we came from, so we know where we are going. We need to get our bearings, especially at moments when we have to make important decisions. And such a moment it was for Philemon.

In vs.21 Paul seems to contradict the whole tenor of this epistle. "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask." In vs. 8 and 9 he had stated specifically that he did not command and consequently there could be no question of obedience or disobedience. I believe that the obedience Paul talks about is Philemon's obedience to God, not to Paul. It is because Paul is confident that Philemon will obey the voice of the Holy Spirit that he trusts that his request will be granted in a royal manner. It is our decision to obey the Lord that governs our human relationships.

Finally, the epistle gives us a blueprint of spiritual growth. This is not the theme of the letter, but something is happening with Philemon while we are reading about him. We don't know what Philemon's reactions were when he discovered that Onesimus had run away and that things were missing from his house. Let us presume that he did not make any profound spiritual statements at that time. He, probably, had written

<sup>26</sup> Phil. 2:3

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 16:26

<sup>28</sup> Ps. 116:12

<sup>29</sup> II Chr. 25:9



off Onesimus. The chance of recovering him must have been very slim. Even if the slave was caught and returned, the situation would only have deteriorated. He would have to be watched more closely, and the possibility of another break would have loomed large.

In the verses 4-8 Paul gave a good testimony about Philemon, who was in the habit of showing love to fellow Christians, although he may have been shy in communicating with unbelievers. It could be that Philemon had worried about his slave, who had run away to his perdition in the big city.

But then comes the bombshell. Not only is Onesimus found and does he come back, but also he has become a new creature in Jesus Christ. And as far as the relationship between the master and his slave is concerned his world crumbles and something new happens. The two brothers embrace one another and for a moment the glory of the Lord shines around them, as it did when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields of Ephrata. Philemon must have passed through the stages of anger, to acceptance, to anxiety, and from wonder to joy and praise. The reality of what God had done surpasses the wildest fantasy of a novel.

### III. CONCLUSION (22-25)

#### a. Paul's proposed visit (22)

***And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.***

We have no idea whether Paul's request for the preparation of a guest room in vs. 20 for his subsequent release ever became a reality or not. In Philippians, he had also expressed the hope for his release. "For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."<sup>30</sup> I have to admit that all this could make more sense if Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus, instead of in Rome, as some expositors presume. Rome was not next door. But then we do not really know how good (or bad) travel communications were between places in the Roman Empire. It is also true that a prisoner's hope is always for his release. Circumstances would otherwise be unbearable. We have no way of knowing if we are dealing with prophetic hope or wishful thinking. Not everything Paul said in his life falls in the category of "Thus saith the LORD." We should recognize ourselves in this situation.

#### b. Greetings (23-25)

***Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.***

Then Paul arrives at the greetings, which means that he is coming to the conclusion of his letter. Five names are mentioned: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. We find all of these names, plus some others, also in Colossians.<sup>31</sup>

- Epaphras was the founder of the church in Colosse.<sup>32</sup>

- Mark is John-Mark who had joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

- Aristarchus was one of Paul's most faithful travel companions. Luke calls him "a Macedonian from Thessalonica."<sup>33</sup> He is one of the two who is seized by the mob during the uproar in Ephesus.<sup>34</sup> And now he is with Paul, while the Apostle is in prison.

- Demas is the only defector from Paul's company, as we learn later. "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica."<sup>35</sup>

- Luke, who joined Paul during his second missionary journey, when he boarded ship in Troas, stayed with Paul till the end of his life. Paul calls him: "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor."<sup>36</sup> And in Second Timothy we read: "Only Luke is with me."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Phil. 1:19

<sup>31</sup> Col. 4:10-14

<sup>32</sup> Col. 1:17

<sup>33</sup> Acts. 27:2

<sup>34</sup> See Acts 19:29

<sup>35</sup> II Tim. 4:10

The concluding blessing in vs. 25 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,” is quite common in Paul’s epistles. We find literally the same words in Galatians and Philippians.<sup>38</sup> In shorter forms, without the word ‘spirit,’ it is found elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> The spirit being the human organ for fellowship with God, I believe the blessing means something in the line of “May your fellowship with God be sweet.”

In conclusion we may say that the letter to Philemon is much more than a letter of recommendation for Onesimus. It is more than a sample of courteous communication, or an interesting record of a period when slavery was prevalent and the church started to cope with the issue. All this it is, but it is also an object lesson of spiritual growth. Onesimus learned how to act after his conversion. He was taught how a Christian should behave in the status in life in which he happened to be and how to make amends for the wrongs he had committed, before he came to know the Lord. And Philemon learned to grow in his life with the Lord through the experience of losing a slave and finding a brother. He broke through a social barrier, which, at that time, must have been like a concrete wall. He learned the truth of Jesus’ words in Matthew, where the King says to those who have treated people of lower status as fellow human beings: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Onesimus learned to recognize Christ in Philemon, and Philemon learned to recognize Christ in Onesimus. It goes both ways. The solution to social injustice is no one-way street.

Hazlehurst, GA. May 5, 1993.

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<sup>36</sup> Col. 4:14

<sup>37</sup> II Tim. 4:11

<sup>38</sup> Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23

<sup>39</sup> See Rom. 16:20; I Cor. 16:23; II Cor. 13:14; I Thess. 5:28, and II Thess. 3:18