

PHILEMON

**The Letter of Paul
to Philemon**

Introduction

This is Paul's shortest letter. It is a personal letter written to a man called Philemon who has a leading role in a local church. The letter gives no indication of where Philemon lives. However, it is about his slave, Onesimus, who is mentioned also in Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he is referred to as 'one of you'(4:9), that is to say, as a member of the Christian community in Colossae. This points to Colossae as the likely home of Philemon also. We will have more to say about Colossae when we come to the letter to the Colossians. For the moment it is sufficient to note that it is a rather small town on the Lycus river in the Roman province of Asia, about 180 kilometres inland from Ephesus.

As for Paul, all we know from the letter is that he is writing from prison. In *Acts* Luke mentions an overnight imprisonment in Philippi (*Acts* 16:23) and two lengthy imprisonments in Caesarea (*Acts* 24:27) and Rome (*Acts* 28:30). In both Caesarea and Rome his imprisonment was such that he was able to be in communication with friends and there are scholars who favour one or other of these places as the likely city of origin for this letter. However, Paul himself tells the Corinthians shortly after leaving Ephesus that he experienced imprisonment on quite a number of occasions (2*Corinthians* 11:23). It is not at all unlikely that Paul experienced imprisonment at some time during his three years of missionary activity in Asia.

We should remember that imprisonment in those days was not used as a punishment. Sentences for crimes ranged from flogging to exile or execution. Imprisonment was a practical measure whereby an accused was held in detention awaiting trial or execution. From what we know of the difficulties which Paul had to undergo in Ephesus (see page 174), it is hard to imagine that he would not have been denounced by one or other of the groups that he had antagonised and had to spend some time in detention till the accusations levelled at him were dismissed and he was set free.

The main reason for suggesting Asia for this letter is that Paul asks Philemon to 'prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you'(verse twenty-two). When he was in prison in Caesarea he had already said concerning the east that 'there is no further place for me in these regions'(Romans 15:23), and he had told the presbyters of Ephesus in Asia: 'None of you will ever see my face again'(Acts 20:25). He had his eyes set on Rome. It seems unlikely that he would plan to visit Colossae from Caesarea. When he got to Rome, at least in the early period of his stay there, he was surely hoping to continue west to Spain (Romans 15:28), not return east to Asia. There is also the fact that the situation described in the letter is more understandable, as we shall see, if Paul is writing from somewhere reasonably close to Colossae. One problem with suggesting Asia is that Paul includes Luke among those who are with him (verse twenty-four), whereas Luke says nothing of this in *Acts*. However, Luke is a very self-effacing historian and unless he travelled with Paul during this period, we should not be surprised at his silence.

This is a beautifully composed letter, filled with respect and love. It reveals Paul's deeply affectionate nature. The loving way in which he appeals to Philemon in a matter of great delicacy, but also of great importance, gives us a privileged insight into Paul's wisdom and into the way in which he lives the gospel which he preaches.

Onesimus is a slave in the household of Philemon. For reasons which are not explained, he absconded from Colossae and made contact with Paul. It may be that he had heard of Paul from his Christian master and came searching for him, hoping that he would mediate with Philemon to better his situation. Such a practice was not uncommon. In which case, he may have intended to return to Philemon all along, rather than face the severe punishment of the law against runaway slaves. On the other hand he may have been chancing his fortune and his meeting with Paul may have been unplanned. In any case, having met Paul he has become a Christian and Paul has persuaded him, if such persuasion was necessary, to return to his master, with the letter which we have before us.

On the subject of slavery, we refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 3:28 where Paul writes: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'; and also the commentary on 1Corinthians 7:21-22 where he writes: 'Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. However, if you can gain your freedom, take the opportunity. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ'.

Domestic slavery was part of the social fabric of the day. Some slaves were prisoners of war. Others were kidnapped by slave hunters. Still others were enslaved through debt. We will miss the point of this brief, personal, letter if we expect it to include Paul's thinking on the subject of slavery as an institution. However, we will also miss the point if we fail to see that what Paul writes here is a radical challenge to the master-slave relationship.

The text of this letter is found in all the early parchment books (codices) and a number of verses are found also in P⁸⁷ from the middle of the second century. There is no significance in the fact that it is not found in the papyrus book P⁴⁶, as there are a number of pages missing from the end of the book which could easily have included Philemon. An interesting suggestion has been made as to why such a brief personal letter was preserved. A man names Onesimus was a bishop in Ephesus in the opening years of the second century (see Ignatius of Antioch: *Letter to the Ephesians* I.3). It is likely that Paul's letters were gathered into a book at this time for wider distribution. If Onesimus was the person responsible for this, and if he is the Onesimus of Paul's letter to Philemon, this would explain the inclusion of this letter.

Structure and lectionary readings

The Structure of Philemon

Introduction: Greeting and expression of thanks	1-7
Personal appeal on behalf of Onesimus	8-20
Repeating his appeal by way of a peroration	21-22
Concluding greetings and blessing	23-25

The liturgical readings

1-6	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
7-20	32nd Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
9-10,12-17	23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
21-25	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

As in all his letters, Paul calls himself by his Roman family name (see page 11). This is a personal letter. It will become clear that Paul has no intention of calling upon his apostolic authority to exert pressure on Philemon. He introduces himself, therefore, simply as a ‘prisoner of Christ Jesus’. In earlier letters he spoke of himself as a ‘slave of Christ’ (Galatians 1:10; see 1 Corinthians 7:22). In Paul’s farewell speech to the presbyters of Ephesus, Luke has him speak of himself as ‘captive to the Spirit’ (Acts 20:22). Here in this present text Paul is referring primarily to the fact that he is in prison (see verse thirteen) because he is carrying out the commission given him by the risen Jesus.

He writes as a member of a Christian community – hence the inclusion of Timothy – and he writes to a member of a Christian community – hence the inclusion of Apphia (Philemon’s wife?), Archippus (he seems to have struggled with Paul against the opponents of the gospel in some way), and ‘the church in your house’. We know from the Acts that the disciples met in their homes for the breaking of bread (Acts 2:46). Philemon is providing the same kind of hospitality to the Christian community in Colossae as Prisca and Aquila were providing in Ephesus (see 1 Corinthians 16:19).

Paul acknowledges the affection that binds him to Philemon by addressing him as ‘our dear friend’ (Greek: *agapētos*). This letter is in effect all about love (*agapē*) and its implications. He recognises Philemon’s ministry of hospitality in Colossae by describing him as a ‘co-worker’ in the spreading of the gospel and concludes his opening greeting in his customary way, praying that they will be open to the gracious self-giving of God and that they will enjoy that graced harmony in the community that is the fruit of God’s gift to them of the Spirit that binds the Father to the exalted Jesus. See the commentary on Galatians 1:3 for a fuller reflection on the words ‘grace’ and ‘peace’.

Inspired by Jesus’ own practice, Paul speaks of God as ‘our Father’. We refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:1 for a fuller reflection on this, as well as for the significance of Paul’s referring to Jesus as the ‘Christ’ (‘Messiah’). Not content to proclaim Jesus as the one promised by God to fulfil the Messianic hopes of Israel, Paul speaks of him also as ‘Lord’, for Jesus reigns as king over the whole of creation, and because it is through him that God wills to bring about the salvation of the world (see the commentary on Galatians 1:13).

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God

⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

The address is followed, as usual, by an expression of gratitude (Greek: *eucharisteō*). Paul notes those special qualities of Philemon to which he wishes to appeal in the letter: his love and faith. As he wrote elsewhere: ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), and Philemon is rich in both. We refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 5:6 for a fuller reflection on Paul’s understanding of love. For a reflection on ‘faith’ see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.

Philemon’s love is directed to all the ‘saints’, all those consecrated to God in baptism, holy because they are temples in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Philemon’s faith is directed towards the Lord Jesus, for it is in Jesus that he has placed his trust, and it is to him that he has pledged obedience in furthering the kingdom of God under the inspiration of Jesus’ Spirit.

Paul is about to make a request of Philemon and he would like Philemon to consider a positive response to his request as a way of making ‘effective’ (*energēs*) the ‘sharing’ (*koinōnia*) of his faith. He is encouraging him to live the consequences of the communion which he enjoys in the Christian community.

Addressing Philemon as ‘my brother’, Paul assures him of the joy which he experiences from Philemon’s love and the encouragement it gives Paul to see Philemon so beautifully refreshing the hearts of the Christians in Colossae. He wrote in similar terms to the Corinthians telling them how his spirit was refreshed by the visit of Stephanas and his companions (see 1Corinthians 16:18).

It is clear from verse eight that Paul judges that what he is about to request of Philemon is something which Philemon is obliged to do by virtue of being a disciple of Jesus. The ‘energy’ of the new life in Christ which Philemon shares should impel him to say Yes to Paul’s request. Paul, therefore, by virtue of his commission from the risen Christ could use his authority to demand Philemon’s obedience. When Paul uses the term ‘bold’ (Greek: *parrēsia*), he is speaking of the power and courage given him by the Spirit of Christ (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:2).

However, Paul has no intention of bringing any pressure to bear upon Philemon other than by appealing to his faith and love. Consistent with this is his calling himself ‘an old man’ and referring, once again, to the fact that he is ‘a prisoner of Christ Jesus’. The term ‘old man’ (Greek: *presbutēs*) suggests someone in his middle to late fifties and is meant to tug at Philemon’s heart-strings. Incidentally, this is the only hint in all Paul’s writings that allows us to offer a suggestion as to the approximate date of Paul’s birth. If we are correct in suggesting that Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus the date 54AD is likely. This would mean that Paul was born a few years BC and would make him a contemporary of Jesus himself who was born about 4BC.

Verse ten introduces the subject of the letter. Onesimus is a slave belonging to Philemon who has become a Christian through Paul’s ministry while in prison. We are reminded of Paul’s words to the Corinthians:

Though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

– 1Corinthians 4:15

Paul also speaks of himself as a ‘mother’:

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of child-birth until Christ is formed in you.

– Galatians 4:19

Paul tells Philemon that he is sending his slave back to him, and that in giving up Onesimus, he is losing his heart. He puns on the name ‘Onesimus’, which means ‘useful’. He has been of no use to Philemon since he absconded, and was probably useless even beforehand. The fact that Onesimus absconded indicates that he was probably a generally disgruntled slave. Now that he has become a Christian, Paul is assuring Philemon that he is a different person and that Philemon can expect him now to live up to his name.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love — and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother — especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

As an indication of how much Onesimus means to Paul, he tells Philemon that he would also like to have Onesimus close by to help him while he is in prison. In using the verb *diakoneō*, Paul is drawing attention to the fact that he sees Onesimus's helping him as carrying out the will of God as a 'servant of the Lord'. For this to happen, however, Paul recognises that Philemon, to whom Onesimus belongs as a slave, would need to give his approval.

Still preparing the way for his request, Paul suggests that God's providence may have played a role in Onesimus leaving Philemon. It has led to his becoming a Christian, and therefore a very loved brother to Paul. His becoming a Christian has also radically changed his relationship with his master, Philemon, for now he is a 'beloved brother' also to Philemon 'in the Lord'. This new relationship will mean a different relationship also 'in the flesh' — that is to say, in their ordinary everyday relationships.

Paul does not directly ask Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom. He continues to focus on the change in relationship of master and slave that is brought about by love and faith — the two qualities in which Philemon excels. The situation is a delicate one. In a social environment in which domestic slavery was taken for granted, Philemon would have been expected by his peers to exercise his authority in punishing Onesimus for absconding. Law and order, the self-interest of the well-to-do class to which Philemon belonged, continuation of social harmony, all pointed to his asserting his rights. There was also the matter of saving face, of pride and of what most would have considered justifiable anger. Paul appeals to Philemon to act from 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). Onesimus has found the only freedom that ultimately counts: the freedom that comes through faith in Christ. The challenge that Paul is putting to Philemon is: is he, Philemon, free enough to respond in love to grace?

Paul appeals to the commitment which he and Philemon share in working together for the spread of Christ's reign. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul himself. Since Philemon has no doubt suffered some financial loss through Onesimus's absconding, Paul puts his signature to a promise to make it up out of his own pocket.

In his opening address, Paul wrote:

I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

– Philemon 7

He appeals to Philemon, 'in Christ', to share this same refreshment with Paul. It is in the same Spirit that he says that he is confident in Philemon's obedience. He is not speaking of his obedience to Paul, for Paul is not issuing any orders. He is speaking of Philemon's obedience to Christ, the 'obedience of faith' (Romans 1:6). He is asking Philemon to reflect upon what Christ is asking of him through Paul's letter.

What can 'knowing that you will do even more than I say' mean if not Philemon's granting Onesimus his freedom and accepting him now as a patron accepts a client instead of as a master accepts a slave? Paul is confident in what Philemon will do, and the fact that the letter survived indicates that it met with a positive response.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

²²One thing more — prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,

²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul is expecting to be freed from prison and hopes to meet up with Philemon to share his hospitality and friendship in Christ. As noted in the Introduction to this letter, it is this remark that points to Paul's imprisonment being in the vicinity of Colossae, hence at Ephesus, rather than at Caesarea or Rome.

It was Epaphras who brought the gospel to Colossae (see Colossians 1:7). Paul informs Philemon that Epaphras is in prison with him and sends his greetings as well.

We know from the *Acts* that Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4). He was in Ephesus with Paul and was caught up in the riot that ensued when the populace turned against Paul and his companions (Acts 19:29). Luke tells us that after Paul left Ephesus, Aristarchus was among those who accompanied Paul from Corinth to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4), was with him in Caesarea and travelled with him to Rome (Acts 27:2).

It is especially interesting to note that Paul has with him two of the evangelists, Mark and Luke. They, along with Aristarchus and Demas are also mentioned in the greetings which Paul gives in his letter to the Colossians (see Colossians 4:10,14).

The final blessing is identical with that which concludes the letter to the Galatians.