

Text: Philemon 1-7

Title: A Very Personal Letter

Truth: Be a person growing in faith, love, and understanding of the good things of Christ.

Date/Location: Verses 1-3 Sunday March 13, 2016 at FBC; All verses on Wed. March 30, 2016 at DBTS chapel; Verses 4-7 Sunday April 3, 2016 at FBC

Introduction

Philemon is in a small class of books in the New Testament. First, it is a single chapter, one page, 25 verses. It is about the same length as the letter from Jude, and a bit longer than 2 and 3 John.

The letter is also somewhat unique in that it is addressed to an individual person. The only other individual recipients of inspired Pauline correspondence were Timothy and Titus. Actually the letter to Philemon is also addressed to two other people and to the church that it meets in Philemon's home, but it is mainly written to Philemon, as seen by the singular pronouns and verbs throughout most of the rest of the letter. In verse 20, Paul addresses Philemon directly with the word *brother* in the singular. Several verses do address the wider church (v. 3, 22, 25).

I. Greeting, v. 1-3

A. From

1. Paul, the apostle. He wrote at the same time as Philippians and Colossians. We know this because of the common names such as Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke in both Philemon and Colossians, as well as the commonality of Onesimus. The letter was probably written around AD 58-61. Among Biblical scholarship there is little doubt about his authorship for there would be no reason for a pseudonymous author to write such a letter. Regardless of how some may doubt or deny Pauline authorship, let us simply acknowledge the Word of God that Paul is in fact the author.

The phrase prisoner of Jesus Christ does not refer to a spiritual "captivation," although Paul is subject to Christ as His master and Lord; but this refers to his incarceration by Rome. Paul is not a prisoner apart from the knowledge and will of Christ because of human circumstances; he is a prisoner for the sake of Christ and the gospel, permitted by and ordained by Christ.

He may mention that he is a prisoner to "soften up" Philemon. Without charging Paul with gross manipulation, we can agree that he *is*

imprisoned, and this may help Philemon to do the right thing with Onesimus, considering his relatively well-off state compared to Paul. For us, we should not complain, not only in view of what God has done for us, but also as we look at those who are prisoners and persecuted for Christ, we have nothing to complain about.

2. Timothy. He is Paul's "apostolic representative," and before that, a young disciple who came under Paul's training for ministry (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy is included as a "courtesy" but he is not a co-author. The singular first-person pronouns make it clear throughout the body of the letter that Paul is the human author of the letter.

Over time, it became Timothy's role to carry out tasks assigned by Paul as his personal assistant or representative. We see this on a number of occasions in the New Testament. Paul assigned Timothy to remain in Ephesus to deal with false teaching there and set the church in order (1 Timothy 1:3-4 and 3:15). Timothy continued ministering in Berea when Paul had to leave because of persecution (Acts 17:14). Timothy traveled to Corinth to help the believers there know Paul's doctrine and practice (1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10). He was a preacher of the Word of God (2 Cor. 1:19). Paul sent him to Thessalonica to encourage and strengthen the church there because Paul could not return due to persecution (1 Thess. 3:2). Four verses later, we see Timothy returned from Thessalonica and brought wonderful news of the steadfast faith of the believers there (1 Thess. 3:6). He was sent on various other missions (Acts 19:22, 20:4-5; Philippians 2:19) and was listed as a "co-author" on several of the epistles. He was charged to continue to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 1:17-18), to continue preaching the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2) and to guard the holy deposit of the faith entrusted to him (1 Tim. 6:20, 2 Tim. 1:14). He even was imprisoned because of the gospel (Heb. 13:23).

3. Both men are listed in the "author section" of other letters as well. They are also listed together in 2 Cor. 1:1, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1:1.

B. To

1. Philemon. From indications in the text, we can glean a few facts about an otherwise obscure man named Philemon. Philemon was very likely a man of some means since he had a home large enough to accommodate a group of believers for meetings. He also had at least one servant or slave, Onesimus, further suggesting that he had some wealth. He was a Christian man, as indicated in the text at verse 19.

When or where he heard the gospel is not detailed in the text, but perhaps when Paul was teaching for over 2 years in Ephesus (Acts 19:1, 8-10). They were perhaps coworkers for a while.

2. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife, who would have had daily contact with and some authority over the servants of the household.
3. Archippus was a leader in the church, likely the pastor of the Colossian church (Col. 4:17). He may have been the son of Philemon and Apphia. If so, the whole family was a Christian family. We do not know of any other children. Archippus had received a ministry from the Lord (Col. 4:17) and is called a fellow soldier of Paul and Timothy (Philemon 2), meaning a worker with them in the gospel (not a military soldier).
4. Church in Philemon's house. Because Paul says that Onesimus is "one of you" to the Colossians (4:9), this tells us that Philemon lived in Colossae, and the church in his house was the one to which Paul wrote Colossians.

The letter was addressed to the church people, so we suppose that all of these people would read it, or have it read to them. I wondered what this might do to the primary recipient of the letter when it is also addressed to a larger group of his close friends.

1. It would seem that when you are given an appeal and instructions in front of a larger group of people who can exert a positive influence on you, that would help you to be godly and to heed the appeal.
2. This was not an individual matter only—it had a corporate impact. The church also needed to know about receiving this runaway slave back as a brother in Christ. They should welcome him back despite his leaving his post for a while, because in the meanwhile he has been born again.
3. The letter contains a very practical appeal for forgiveness and reconciliation based on a two-way imputation that is a beautiful picture of what God did for us in Christ. This appeal and truth would be deeply edifying to the church family there.
4. Writing to include the church in Colossae helped the letter to be copied and propagated to us. Since the letter *was* inspired by God's Spirit, it was destined to reach all churches of all time, so there was no reason for Paul to not address it to the wider church as well as the personal recipient.

C. Grace and Peace

1. This is Paul's standard greeting in most of his letters.

2. It is effectively a prayer wish for the recipients to have a continued experience of the outpouring of God's unmerited favor and mercy upon them. We must remember that we are situated in an age of particular grace; and an age in which God has extended peace to former enemy combatants such as ourselves. This peace harkens back to the peace of the Hebrew Bible and looks forward to the wholeness and prosperity of the kingdom of God when it arrives in its glory with Christ's return to the earth.
3. As in all his letters, Paul expresses this grace and peace as coming from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Right belief must hold the Father and the Son on an equal plane despite the tendency to think of a father as greater than a son. The grace and peace come equally from Father and Son.

II. Background of the Situation

- A. One person is not mentioned in the greeting, but was closely involved, and that is Onesimus himself. He is mentioned twice in Scripture (Col. 4:9 and Philemon 10), but he is the reason behind this entire letter. He traveled with Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25) and Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 4:7-9) to deliver the letters to the Philippians, Ephesians Colossians, and Philemon.
- B. Onesimus ran away and stole some things from Philemon his master. For ease of explanation, we will just suppose that he stole some money, or things that could be replaced with money (verse 18 "owes"). Paul expands on that notion by suggestion that Onesimus may have "wronged" Philemon, but we do not know any details of how that might have come about. Onesimus was in an awkward spot, going back to his former master whom he had cheated or stolen from. But he was also in a good spot, having Paul intercede for him!
- C. The runaway happened upon Paul in Rome, was converted, and became a helpful minister to Paul (Philemon 10-13, 16). How exactly this happened is unknown, but would be an interesting story. Perhaps he went to the "big city" to blend in with the masses of humanity so as to not be found. Somehow he crossed paths with Paul. Then after his salvation maybe Onesimus asked Paul for advice. Paul told him to go make restitution, and also wrote a letter of re-introduction and intercession to help and encourage the situation to turn out well.
- D. The name of Onesimus was a common slave name. It means "useful."

III. Paul's Prayer for Philemon, v. 4-6

This section breaks down nicely into a thanksgiving for Philemon, Paul's frequent prayer (how the thanks is offered), the reason for the thanksgiving, and the content of the prayer that Paul makes for Philemon.

Paul is practicing what he preaches in 1 Timothy 2:1 about prayer and giving thanks for all men.

A. Verse 4: Paul gave thanks to God in consistent prayer. Paul was obviously a man of much prayer, an example which we need to follow. He often prayed for certain people daily, or at least very regularly. The text says that he makes mention always in prayer. We have no reason to think that Paul is exaggerating or bragging about this. Therefore, we understand that he spent significant time in prayer for believers all over the Roman world. This is a model for us and probably puts many of us to shame, as I sense of myself when I ponder this kind of discipline, desire, and practice of prayer.

1. Notice his personal connection to God ("my God"), not an abstract connection.
2. When you "remember" someone in prayer, it is more than calling them to mind; it is also asking that God will do something for the person. This includes Paul thanking God for His work in the believer's life.

Apply: Be a person of prayer! You cannot soon despise people for whom you genuinely pray daily; rather you will grow in love and concern for them as you appeal to God on their behalf.

B. Verse 5 tells us why Paul thanked God about Philemon: because of Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord and the saints. Following Moo, we should take this as faith toward the Lord (the inner pair) and love toward the saints (the outer pair), in a chiasmic arrangement. This is better than trying to combine the terms and include the idea of "faith toward the saints" because that is a very unusual notion.

1. Paul heard about Philemon's love and faith, not because he did not know Philemon before, but because it has been several years since they have been together.
2. Philemon was a genuine Christian man. His love, verse 7 indicates, gives Paul great joy and encouragement as he sees the effect that it is having on the lives of the other believers in the church—both local

and beyond). Philemon is living a good Christian life and makes Paul's prayers for him a delight instead of a discouragement.

3. Paul is going to appeal for Onesimus to him on the basis of his Christian love.

Apply: Each of these verses is exemplary for us. What kind of love and faith do you have toward the Lord and toward His people?

C. Verse 6 informs us to the content of Paul's prayer. As most commentators agree, "The prayer is in Greek that is unusually difficult to understand." (Arthur Rupprecht, "Philemon" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, p. 459. Homer Kent concurs in *Treasures of Wisdom*, p. 185, along with Moo in the PNTC who says this is the most difficult verse in the book.)

1. Note that when the KJV says "the communication of thy faith" or the NKJV says "the sharing of your faith" or the NIV1984 says "that you may be active in sharing your faith," it does not mean "telling others the gospel" as in "sharing your testimony." (See NAS, NET, and NIV2011 for better renditions.) This "sharing" is not evangelistic sharing.
2. The idea of "sharing" comes from the word "koinonia" which means close association, partnership, and fellowship.
 - i. This word is used in a good sense in 1 Cor. 1:9 and Phil. 3:10 of sharing in Christ and his sufferings; of support with financial gifts; and in a negative way in 2 Cor. 6:14 of partnership with evil.
 - ii. What Paul is saying first of all is that Philemon shares the same faith that Paul and other believers have. This is the foundation upon which Paul's prayer request is made.
3. The prayer is that Philemon's partnership or participation in the faith will enhance his understanding and practice of every good thing he has in Christ.
 - i. The idea is that it should become *more* effective than it is now—not that it is ineffective presently. In a similar example, 1 Thess 4:9-10 is not a rebuke, but is saying that as you have loved the brothers before, you must *continue* and *abound* more and more.
 - ii. The deepening understanding (acknowledgement) that we are talking about here is to really grasp intellectually and do practically. An athletic metaphor helps add color here: you may know a lot of stats and strategies and tricks of the game of basketball, but to get out on the court and put those into practice is an entirely different thing. Similarly here, Paul is praying that a true knowledge-of-

experience will come into play in Philemon's life so that, more than arm-chair coaching, he will be practicing the Christian life in all parts of his life.

iii. The "every good thing" is a vague and wide open kind of statement. It refers to everything we have in Christ.

Apply: Think of the things that God has done for you, salvation preeminent among them. Such acknowledging will naturally include thanksgiving toward God for what He has done.

Now consider that in all these good things, Paul is going to ask Philemon to do one more good thing—verse 14—which will not be very "big" compared to the many goods he has in Christ. With the particular issue of Onesimus, the effectiveness of Philemon's faith will be put to the test. Hopefully he will handle it well.

Apply: The way that you can grow in your understanding of the blessings you have in Christ is to really *participate* in the Christian life. Live it. Love your brothers and sisters. Know the Lord. Witness—confess the Lord. Read, study, memorize, pray. As you do those things, your grasp of the blessings in Christ deepens. You cannot expect that to happen if you are busy living a worldly life. If that is the case, your fellowship in the faith will be ineffective.

As you grow in your understanding of the good things Christ has done for and in you, you will inevitably become more active in living out and proclaiming that faith to others, even in difficult circumstances.

4. An important connection with the larger context is that addressing the letter to the local church will aid in this "mutual participation" that arises from their mutual faith, driving them to practice what is right in the case of Philemon. Some communities put out one of their own and never receive them back if they do wrong; but it is not to be so among Christians.

D. This prayer serves as a preparatory step in Paul's intercession, namely that Philemon's increased participation in the faith and deepening understanding all good things in Christ will help deal with the problem caused by Onesimus. His recognition of his blessings in Christ will minimize his anger at Onesimus.

E. In this suggestion of a "preparatory step," I do not accuse Paul of manipulation. When we face a difficult circumstance, like Philemon has faced with his runaway slave, it can be easy to forget the good things we

have in Christ Jesus and focus on the bad behavior of an individual. Paul directs Philemon's focus to help accomplish his intercessory goal.

IV. Paul's Encouragement to Philemon, v. 7

- A. This is actually a report of joy and encouragement in Paul's heart because of Philemon's love, and *that* evidenced by Philemon's refreshing ministry toward the saints. Paul's saying so would be an encouragement to Philemon too!
- B. Philemon was a man who had served others in a way that brought true refreshment to the saints—a lasting and deep, not superficial or temporary, type of rest. This is the kind of ministry that we should strive for, as pastors, missionaries, and church members.

Conclusion

We will have to read carefully to understand just what the content of Paul's intercession is. How far he is asking Philemon to go with restoring Onesimus is a big question—just to restore him to the household, or to release him permanently for gospel work? Paul is tactful, direct in some ways, but also indirect in others, to let Philemon make up his mind without being coerced.

Moo has this paraphrase of verses 4-7: "Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ" (Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 394).

MAP

See the MacArthur Study Bible Note in the foreword to Philemon: "The rich theological theme that alone dominates the letter is forgiveness, a featured theme throughout NT Scripture (cf. Mt 6: 12–15; 18:21–35; Eph 4:32; Col 3: 13). Paul's instruction here provides the biblical definition of forgiveness, without ever using the word."¹

¹ (2013-10-01). NIV, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, eBook (Signature) (Kindle Locations 290277-290285). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.