

Philemon 1:1-7

Paul's Letter to His Friend and Fellow Laborer

NKJ Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,

2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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

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

5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,

6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Before we turned our attention to Paul's much longer first epistle to the Corinthians, I wanted to go through his letter to Philemon with you, not only because it is much shorter (incidentally you know how Paul's epistles are ordered in the NT don't you? – they go from Longest to Shortest) but because Philemon is highly personal letter that gives us an insight into the state of the early Christian churches in Greece and Asia Minor as Paul was ministering to them.

Philemon has been described as an Apostolic Letter about a personal matter, and one modern commentator noting its length and personal nature has called it, Paul's inspired email to Philemon. I want to give some background and context to the letter itself before I begin to exposit it.

First this is one of what are called Paul's "prison epistles" his letters written while he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial probably in about 60 AD roughly 4-8 years before his execution. It is addressed to Philemon, who lived in the city of Colossae which was a fairly unimportant market town in South Eastern Asia Minor. The letter itself was probably sent as a covering letter with Paul's letter to the Colossians, and delivered by Tychicus a fellow minister with Paul, who was sent with these letters from Paul and with Onesimus, a runaway slave who had become a Christian. We know that from what Paul writes in Col. 4:7-9.

It is this Onesimus who is really the subject of this letter from Paul. He had apparently run away from serving in Philemon's household all the way to Rome. Paul makes it clear that he probably also stole some of his master's money in order to facilitate the journey. Now some might ask why would a slave run from a relatively unimportant town to the center of the empire? Well that's easy to answer, in a small town or city where everyone knew everyone else fairly well, a runaway slave would stick out like a sore thumb, and in the empire there were professional slave catchers who would track down and return runaway slaves for a bounty. Finding a runaway slave in a small city would be easy. Finding a runaway slave, on the other hand, in the biggest city on earth at the time, wouldn't be easy.

Also, for many slaves running away from your master only granted you the freedom to starve. By going to Rome, Onesimus actually stood a chance of finding work with someone who wouldn't inquire too much about his background. While in Rome though, we have another one of these testimonies to the marvelous providence of God in that somehow this runaway slave is brought into contact with the prisoner Paul and is converted to Christianity – hence Paul states in verse 10 that he was someone "*whom I have begotten while in my chains*" – a reference there to newness of life, being born again in the Christian faith.

At some point it becomes evident that Onesimus isn't just any slave, his owner was Philemon a prominent Christian in the church in Colossae. From the fact that Paul refers to him as my fellow laborer it is probable that he was most probably an elder or a fellow minister of the gospel.

Now at this point, there is usually a certain amount of cognitive dissonance that occurs amongst Christians. Wait a minute this guy Philemon is a prominent Christian, a pillar of the church in Colossae, probably a minister – *and he owns slaves?* What's next, Christian drug dealers?

We think that way, because we forget that in 60 AD almost 2/3rds of the inhabitants of the Roman empire were slaves. More often than not individuals and businesses did not have laborers, they had slaves. For instance, if your business was making statues, you had one skilled artisan and then the rest of the business was made up of slaves. There were also hierarchies amongst slaves, you would have foremen, slaves who were in charge of the household, and slaves who were on the lowest rung of the ladder. For instance, one of the reasons why Christ's washing of the Apostles feet was so shocking to them was that this was a task that was reserved for the very lowest of the slaves. The social order meant that you couldn't even command slaves above a certain rank to do it. The evidence is that many if not most Christians at this time were slaves themselves, and so the Church especially outside of Judea was literally made up of Slaves and Slave holders and it wouldn't have been uncommon for a master and his slaves to attend the same church.

Now, just because it was the nature of the social order at the time doesn't mean that this was the way things were supposed to be, and indeed Christianity was to have a profound effect on most of the institutions of the Roman empire, gradually changing them from within. Christianity did not encourage a sudden revolution or a slave revolt, but as one commentator put it even though Christianity presented no revolutionary challenge to the social structures of the day, the implications of its teachings were bound to prove fatal to slavery in the end. We will discuss that subject at greater length next week, but for the moment what that means is this. Christianity and slavery are mutually incompatible, in a manner similar to the way that Christianity is hostile to institutions like gambling (a fact that Las Vegas hotel and casino owners have figured out and have consequently removed the Gideon bibles from their hotel rooms) or totalitarianism, or blood sports. This is very different from say Islam which accepts slavery. In fact in most translations of books on Sharia law, designed for Western Consumption, like *The Reliance of the Traveller* the sections dealing with slavery aren't translated because they know they would appall Western readers. There is a reason, simply put, why slavery is still flourishing in the Islamic world while it has almost entirely died out in states dominated by Christian thought.

So Paul sends back Onesimus along with this letter of request to his fellow laborer Philemon. Now you'll note that Paul mentions that he is a prisoner for the sake of Christ (something that would have made refusing his request very difficult) and mentions that his "son in the faith" Timothy who assisted him in planting churches is with him in Rome, so Philemon probably was acquainted with him. Paul also addresses the other members of Philemon's family in his greeting. There is Apphia his wife, and Archippus. Archippus was most probably Philemon's son, and the fact that Paul calls him his "fellow soldier" undoubtedly means that Archippus was a minister in the church at Colosse as well.

Now regarding the church in his house, I remember teaching on this verse in a bible study at work many years ago, and one of the people there said, "*they must have had pretty big houses back then*" and I didn't know what he meant. In talking with him though, it became clear that because he went to a

church with over 500 members, he figured that their houses must have been huge to be able to hold an entire church. Well, that's not the case. At this point cities would have had several churches and at this time, it was impossible for them to have their own buildings. Each congregation would have met in the a house, and therefore we can guess they probably were relatively small. Certainly no bigger than this congregation, and it was fitting that Philemon's son was pastor to a congregation that met in their own home.

Paul sends his wishes that Philemon might continue to receive grace and peace from God, the only true source of grace, that is unmerited mercy, and peace that is the reconciliation between God and man.

He mentions also, that while he has been imprisoned in Rome the bonds of communion between he and Philemon have been continued and that he has continued to receive reports of his activities and daily prays for him, thanking God for his faith towards Christ, and His love and good works in the church. Now you'll note that Paul doesn't thank Philemon for those works, because he keeps in mind that God is the author and the finisher of our faith: As he himself wrote in Eph. 2:8 ***For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,***

9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

He knows that the inevitable result of saving faith in Jesus Christ, is good works and he rejoices that Philemon is being greatly used. The truth of Philemon's faith has been manifested in the good works which are the result of Christ's working in him, this produces godliness, holy living, and charity. And in turn others are impressed and so the Christian faith is spread. Had Philemon life contradicted his witness, the gospel he preached would have hardly impressed his fellow Colossians.

That sadly is one of the reasons the impact of the church has been so badly blunted today, modern evangelicals have a deficit when it comes to godliness and true charity, and I mean by that *love* to our fellow men. Often we are in danger of being a worse example than the world around us. When our divorce rates are *higher* than those amongst atheists for instance...

But Paul rejoices that Philemon's love has been manifested in his relief of the needs of the saints in the Colossian church, some have thought this might have been associated with a terrible earthquake in that city in 60 AD. This would also tend to indicate that Philemon was probably wealthy.

Application: Faith in Christ produces Love unto Men

Good works are not the cause of your salvation, they are the inevitable result of it

Your testimony should be enhanced as Philemon's was by your self-less love and good works to members of the church

Although faith has a hidden residence in the heart, yet it communicates itself to men by good works. – CALVIN

Without that faith, good works are impossible. Dead trees do not produce living fruit. Example: Stapling on apples