

The Book of Philemon

An unrolled scroll of parchment with Hebrew text, resting on a wooden scroll holder against a dark background. The scroll is partially unrolled, showing several lines of text in a traditional Hebrew script. The wooden holder is made of a dark, polished wood and has a decorative, fluted design. The background is a solid, dark color, possibly black or dark brown, which makes the scroll and the text stand out.

The Model

- This is a story of Grace and forgiveness
- It is a perfect summary of the Gospel acted out by the principle characters:
 - Paul
 - A type of Christ
 - Philemon
 - A type of the Father
 - Onesimus
 - A Runaway and rebellious servant (a.k.a. You!)
 - Tychicus
 - A type of the Holy Spirit

The Cast

- Philemon was an Elder at Colossae
- The church met in his home
- The letter is actually a private letter to him and his immediate family
- ...but greetings at the beginning and end imply it was intended for public hearing.
- Paul is going to present an audacious request – but was willing to bear the cost of his request to ensure the forgiveness and restoration of Onesimus

The Cast

- Onesimus was a servant (salve) of Philemon
- Yet at some point he stole from him and ran away to Rome
- Instead of finding refuge in the crowded city, he came in contact with Paul and was converted.
- Once worthless, he began to live up to his name, “Profitable” v.11
- Although Paul would have liked to have kept him as his friend and helper, he insists he return to his wronged master in Colossae.

The Cast

- But since he left as a pagan, and returned as a Christian, Philemon is asked to receive him as a “brother beloved” v.16
 - It can be assumed that Philemon did, indeed, respond to Paul’s appeal, since he would not have circulated a letter he refused to obey.
 - This all occurred about the time that Paul received news from Epaphras of the threat to the faith in Colossae, which gave rise to the epistle to the Colossians.

The Cast

- Paul entrusted Tychicus with the responsibility to protect Onesimus from arrest by slave catchers on the return journey
- ...and also to deliver the letters to the Laodiceans (Ephesians?) and Colossians, in addition to this letter to Philemon.
 - The letter appears to stop short of asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom,
 - Total freedom may not have been a good thing!
 - The social conditions of the time might have relegated this to the freedom to starve...

The Background

- Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire
 - men & women were traded like pieces of chattel or merchandise.
- The average slave sold for 500 denarii.
 - One denarii was a day's wage
- Educated and skilled slaves were sold for as much as 50,000 denarii.

The Background

- A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money
 - Acts 22:28
- If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials and the slave would be on the “wanted” list.
- The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave.

The Challenge

- Philemon would be facing a dilemma.
 - If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think?
 - If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony?

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

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

Philemon v1-2

- Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ...
- The greatest Freedom!

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

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

Philemon v1-2

- Apphia – wife of Philemon? If so, in charge of the household duties for slaves – Her response would be key
- Archippus – Son of Philemon? If so, not the order – he is listed after his parents!

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

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

Philemon v1-2

- **We are to be living Epistles**
- “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men” **2 Cor 3:2**
- Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. **2 Cor 3:3**

Home Churches

- The church was the congregation which would have to recognize Onesimus as a Christian.
 - This would also put pressure on Philemon to heed Paul's request.
 - If Paul had not included this church in his salutation, they might have gossiped when they saw Onesimus had returned.

Home Churches

- The practice of churches meeting in private homes for worship was common up to AD 200.
 - Not until the third century did churches meet in separate buildings.
 - Home churches were frequently mentioned by Paul Rom 16:5; Col 4:15

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

Philemon v3

- ...the source of all blessings. Grace is the unmerited favor of God, and peace is the state of spiritual well-being which flows from the reception of this grace.
 - There is no grace unless God bestows it, and there is no real peace unless it flows forth from God's reconciliation with sinful man.

- 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;

Philemon v4-5

- **God alone is the author of salvation.**
 - **Paul does not congratulate Philemon on his conduct as a Christian.**

Philemon's Love for the Saints

- Paul probably heard about Philemon's faith and love from Epaphras (pastor)
 - Col 1:7, 8; 4:12
- Paul is particularly glad that Philemon is so forward in showing love for all saints because he is about to ask for a further demonstration of it
 - vv.9, 16

Introduction

- Paul introduces seven terms:
 - Love vs.5, 7, 9, 16;
 - Prayers v.22;
 - Sharing v.17;
 - Partner v.17;
 - The Good v.14;
 - Goodness v.14;
 - Heart vv.12, 20;
 - Refreshed v.20.

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

Philemon v6

- The communication: **Gr koinonia**, or sharing, may demonstrate what God desires believers to perform
 - **Rom 12:2; Gal 65:10; 1 Thess 5:15**
- Paul is preparing Philemon for the request in v.14. By acting out what God's grace has first worked in, Philemon will be drawn closer to Christ, and serve to glorify Him.

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 thee that which is convenient,

Philemon v7-8

- The word “brother” at the end makes an effective appeal which he is about to be called on again in the way he receives Onesimus!

9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech 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:

Philemon v9-10

- Love is regarded as the principle which demands a deferential respect.
- Paul reinforces his appeal as “an old man”
- Paul was nearly 60, and prematurely aged by his sufferings.

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

Philemon v11

- Onesimus means “profitable.”
 - He apparently rendered only grudging service before his flight. Paul seems to be indulging in some playful humor: the slave that had been unprofitable to him in the past has now become profitable to them both Col 3:22ff; v.13
- Philemon means “affectionate,” or “one who is kind.”
 - If the slave is to live up to his name, what about his master?

12 Whom I have sent again; thou therefore **receive him,**
that is, mine own bowels : **Philemon v12**

*Gr: splagchnon (splangkh'-non); "spleen")

- Lit. *“Receive him as you would receive me”*
- This is what Christ has done for each of us.
 - We can now have boldness to enter God’s presence through the blood of Jesus
 - Hebrews 10:19
 - We have been clothed in Jesus’ righteousness
 - Philippians 3:9 / James 2:23
 - We have been adopted as His own child
 - Romans 8:15 / Galatians 4:5 / Ephesians 1:5

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

Philemon v13

- Onesimus has demonstrated such a dramatic change that Paul would have loved to retain him.
- Onesimus' conversion did not alter his legal position as a slave, nor did it cancel his debt to the law or his master.
- However, it did give him a new standing before God and before God's people, and Philemon has to take this into consideration.

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

Philemon v14

- Love cannot be compelled (!)
- So Paul refuses to intrude on a decision that must be Philemon's own
- His reception of Onesimus must not even *seem* to be constrained.

¹⁵ For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; **Philemon v15**

- Instead of focusing on Onesimus' desertion, Paul suggests the euphemism which Joseph used
Gen 45:5; 50:20
– **God overruled evil for good.**
- It seems that God's purpose in this brief parting was that Philemon might enter into a new relationship with Onesimus which not even death could dissolve! **v.16**
- We can assume that Philemon and his family had witnessed to Onesimus and prayed for him. He had left for Rome as a slave and returned as a brother.

All things... together for good?

- *“How often our own hardships are but a gateway to blessings we would have otherwise been denied!”*
- Do we see problems like this?
 - Part of God’s plan? Rom 8:28
- Do we grant that God is able to answer our prayers in the way He chooses?
 - So that He takes the glory? 1 Cor 1:27-31

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

Philemon v16

- The relationship between master and slave is now on an entirely different plane because both are in Christ

1 Cor 7:21-24; Col 3:11

- Onesimus was now *both* Philemon's slave *and* his brother. He had a brother for a slave and a slave for a brother.

Philemon's Dilemma

- This posed a real dilemma for Philemon:
 - If he was too easy on Onesimus, it might influence other slaves to “become Christians” to influence their masters.
 - If he was too hard on the man, it would affect Philemon's testimony and ministry at Colossae

Free To Serve

16 Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

Romans 6:16

Free To Serve

- 7 For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.
- 8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

Romans 14:7-8

Paul, the Burdened Partner

(vv.17-25)

- Onesimus may have robbed Philemon of a substantial sum—perhaps the cost of the long journey to Rome—and Paul offers to pay for restitution.
- Even though Paul is urging forgiveness, the debt still must be paid.
- Paul is willing to take that debt upon himself
- Once again, this is the heart of the Gospel
- Christ took our sin upon Himself

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;

Philemon v17-18

- “Partner” is the Greek word *koinonon*, which means “to have in common.” It is also translated “communion,” “communication,” or “fellowship.”
- Paul is saying that just as we have fellowship, so now extend that fellowship to Onesimus
- Because of our relationship, invite him into our family

Imputed Grace

9 For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

Imputed Grace

- 6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.
- 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.
- 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6-8

Imputed Grace

²¹ For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

2 Corinthians 5:21

The Price of our Freedom

- **Father.**
- *My son, here is a company of poor miserable souls, that have utterly undone themselves, and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them, or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them: What shall be done for these souls And thus Christ returns.*

The Price of our Freedom

- **Son.**
- *O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all thy bills, that I may see what they owe thee; Lord, bring them all in, that there may be no after-reckonings with them; at my hand shalt thou require it. I will rather choose to suffer thy wrath than they should suffer it: upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.*

The Price of our Freedom

- **Father.**
- *But, my Son, if thou undertake for them, thou must reckon to pay the last mite, expect no abatements; if I spare them, I will not spare thee.*

The Price of our Freedom

- **Son.**
- *Content, Father, let it be so; charge it all upon me, I am able to discharge it: and though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures, yet I am content to undertake it.*

The Price of our Freedom

- Blush, ungrateful believers, O let shame cover your faces; judge in yourselves now, has Christ deserved that you should stand with him for trifles, that you should shrink at a few petty difficulties, and complain, this is hard, and that is harsh? O if you knew the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in this his wonderful condescension for you, you could not do it.

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.

Philemon v19

- Paul seems to take up the pen from the amanuensis to sign this IOU and make it legally binding.
 - (Paul does not, however, really expect to have it taken up! Philemon owes Paul far more. Paul does not expect him to collect the lesser debt.
 - It appears that it was Paul that led Philemon to Christ. Both Philemon and Onesimus had the same spiritual father.)

20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord:
refresh my bowels in the Lord.

Philemon v20

- “Yea” gathering up all that Paul has said on behalf of Onesimus, and adds a final personal plea.
- Since Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints with his deeds of love, **v.7**
- Paul now asks that Philemon not neglect this opportunity to refresh Paul’s heart.
 - Only the Lord could enable him to show such grace to the one who had wronged him.

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

Philemon v21

- With the earthly master's obedience to his Master in heaven thus assured, Paul is confident that Philemon will do even more than he says.
 - (Some infer that Paul is requesting Onesimus' freedom, but this isn't warranted. Paul refuses to specify how the love is to be expressed.)

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

Philemon v22

- Paul evidently anticipated an early release from prison and solicits a guest room be readied.
- Paul plans to come and see for himself that Philemon has not disappointed his expectations.
- “Your” is in the plural: it includes the church.

*23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in
Christ Jesus;*

Philemon v23

- Epaphras was the missionary by whose instrumentality the Colossians had been converted to Christianity, and probably the other churches of the Lycus had been founded by him.

Col 1:7

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

Philemon v24

- Four “fellowworkers” include their greetings:
 - (It is now 11 years after Mark’s breach with Paul; 2 years later he tells Timothy to bring Mark with him.)
- Aristarchus: of Thessalonica,
 - Paul's companion on his third missionary tour
- Luke remained with Paul until the end.
 - He wrote both the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Book of Acts*.

Demas

- Demas would later desert Paul and seemingly abandon his faith
- Calvin comments:
 - “And if one of Paul’s assistants became weary and discouraged and was afterwards drawn away by the vanity of the world, let none of us rely too much on our own zeal lasting even one year, but remembering how much of the journey still lies ahead, let us ask God for steadfastness.”

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

Philemon v25

- After addressing Philemon in the singular, v.4 Paul reverts to the plural “your” as he prays that Christ’s grace may rest on the entire community who will hear the letter read as they meet for worship. v.2
- Paul’s word “grace” is the fitting conclusion as his trademark in every epistle.

Summary of Values

- Personal value:
 - light on the character of Paul's Character;
- Ethical value:
 - focus on what is right;
- Providential value:
 - God is behind and above all events;
- Practical value:
 - application of highest principles to the commonest affairs;

Summary of Values

- Evangelical value:
 - encouragement to seek and to save the lowest;
- Social value:
 - presentation of the relation of Christianity to slavery and all unchristian institutions;
- Spiritual value:
 - the analogy between it and the Gospel.

Conclusions

- “We are *all* Onesimuses!”
– Martin Luther
- This is a beautiful picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ!
- It was Christ who says, on our behalf,
“Charge that to My account!
Receive them
as you would receive Me!”

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