

Study 6: Philemon

Introduction

The letter to Philemon forms a part of a trilogy of letters – Ephesians – Colossians – Philemon. Each has a different emphasis, with Philemon emphasising relationships between brethren. Onesimus and Philemon had previously had one form of relationship, but now that Onesimus has become a christian, that relationship has, by necessity, changed permanently.

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Re-read all of the notes as a review of the study

- *Imagine that you are Philemon, receiving the letter. For the last 6 months, you have no idea what has happened to Onesimus. Then, one day he returns with the letter along with Tychicus. How would you be feeling, and how would you react?*
- *What does Paul have to say about the issue of slavery in this letter? Why doesn't Paul come out and condemn it? How does Paul challenge the traditional way slaves are treated by what he writes?*

Notes for study 6: Philemon

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Background to the letter

Philemon was a christian in Colosse, and the owner of the slave Onesimus, who had run away from his master and turned up at Paul's house in Rome. He had travelled around 1000 miles (1600 km), and had (apparently) funded his travels by stealing from his master. Since Philemon was a christian who either knew Paul, or had heard of him (by Paul's comments in the letters), it is therefore probable that Onesimus also knew Paul.

Onesimus was converted by Paul after he arrived in Rome. There is a pun in the name Onesimus, which means "useful". Whilst he had been working for Philemon he may have well been "useless" – especially since he had stolen from him and run away!

After becoming a christian, Onesimus is now *a new man* and has been transformed. He has obligations, just as also Philemon does and could well be punished by Philemon for running away.

Under Athenian law, if a prisoner believed that his life was in danger, he could flee to a place of refuge – which might be a family. The head of the family was obliged to give the slave protection whilst he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused to go back, the householder's duty was to put him up for auction and return the price received for him to his former master.¹

We don't know why Onesimus ran away, or if he came to Paul's house to seek refuge. However, Paul recognises our mutual obligations to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and those of the Master and servant to each other in particular (as he has expounded in Colossians).

Date and occasion of the letter

The letter was written together with the Colossian and the Ephesian letters, and sent with Tychicus. In the salutations, Paul mentions many of the brethren whom are mentioned in the Colossian and Ephesian letters: Timothy, Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. It was written whilst Paul was in prison (1, 9-10), and whilst Luke was still with him.

The Colossian letter is particularly relevant to the Philemon letter, since it addresses the situation in the church in which Philemon was a member. Issues with Onesimus are clearly addressed, since he was being sent back to Colosse with Tychicus and the Colossian letter. This places the date of the two letters together towards the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment in AD 62.

Further evidence for a date late in Paul's imprisonment is the specific instruction for Philemon to prepare the guestroom for his visit (22) as he expected to be released very soon.

¹ Bruce, p.196

Introduction

Paul writes as “...a prisoner of Christ Jesus...” (1) which could refer to his spiritual bondage to Christ, but probably to his physical bondage. As with the Colossian letter, he writes with Timothy, but unlike that letter, there is no evidence of Timothy having penned the letter as a scribe.

The letter is specifically addressed to Philemon, and also to Apphia, whom some writers believe is the wife of Philemon (the oldest writer being Chrysostom in the 4th century. However his writings reveal that he has no more knowledge about the situation in Colosse than we do, and he supposes that this is the case because of the juxtaposition that Paul gives the two names). As such, she would have had personal responsibility for the slaves. However, we have no way of knowing if this were the case. Archippus is also specifically mentioned.

The letter is addressed in a general sense to the church that meets in Archippus’ house “...to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home...” (2 NIV). So whilst it has specific implications to Philemon, it is also a letter written to the church. Some writers have postulated that it is the letter that was written to Laodicea, (whilst others have suggested that the Ephesian letter was the general letter that Paul was referring to).

Paul describes Philemon as “...our beloved friend and fellow labourer...” (1 NKJV) which shows that he must have had some knowledge of him – more likely first hand knowledge than only knowing of him through Epaphras. “Beloved friend” is *agapetos*, which shows the kind of love that Paul has in mind. On the other hand, Paul says that he has been “...hearing of your love and faith...” (5 NKJV) which could suggest that Paul’s knowledge of Philemon only came from Epaphras. Alternately, Paul knew Philemon personally, and Epaphras has only updated his knowledge of the current situation.

Philemon is an active worker for the Lord. Paul describes his “...love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...” (5 NKJV) and “...the sharing of your faith...by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you...” (6 NKJV). Further, “...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother...” (7 NKJV). From Paul’s description, Philemon was a leader in the church – at least a leader in character, if not in appointment. He was active on evangelising and also in the work of encouraging the brethren within the church.

With such a character, you would expect Philemon to give a receptive response to Onesimus when he returns.

Paul’s appeal for Onesimus

As an apostle, Paul could have been very forthright and commanded Philemon to take Onesimus back, and Philemon could have done so by way of duty. However Paul appeals to him, rather than commanding him to do it. “...though I might be very bold in Christ to command you... yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you...” (8-9 NKJV).

Paul describes himself as “...Paul the aged...” however the word for “aged” (*presbutes*) is very similar to the word for “ambassador” (*presbeutes*) and copying errors may well have occurred. Some translations have “...Paul an ambassador...”.

His appeal for Onesimus is “...for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains...” (10 NIV). We can see Paul’s bond of affection for Onesimus, but this verse also tells us that he was converted after he arrived at Paul’s house in Rome.

So, how was it that Onesimus happened to land at Paul’s house in Rome? Did he start out for there from Colosse? Because Rome was so far away from Colosse may be the exact reason he went there – and of course, the fact that it is very easy to get lost in a big city. Or, was it because

he knew Paul, knew that he was in Rome, and knew that he could use his house as a place of refuge? Why did he leave Philemon? The character reference Paul has just given Philemon doesn't sound like a life-threatening situation for Onesimus.

In the last study, we observed that there are two sides to every story, and Paul was sending Tychicus for the specific purpose of finding out what was really happening in Colosse (Col 4:8).

Onesimus the useful

Paul makes a pun on the name Onesimus.

There is a double play on words here. "Onesimus" was a common slave name; it meant "useful" or "profitable." This is also the meaning of another Greek word *chrestos*, which appears here in *achrestos* ("useless"; GK G947) and *euchrestos* ("useful"; GK G2378). *Chrestos* in turn sounded much like *Christos* (the Greek word for "Christ"; GK G5986). An ancient reader would have thought this play on words much more clever and humorous than we would. That Paul uses it at the beginning of his plea for Onesimus shows us something of his exquisite sensitivity and tact. It is as if, realizing the radical nature of what he was about to ask of Philemon, Paul deliberately introduces this bit of humor. (NIVBC).

We need to remember that Paul was under house arrest, and was not a free man. Under other circumstances, Paul might have assumed custody of the runaway slave. Paul and Onesimus are in similar situations, with both under bondage through circumstances outside of their own control. Paul's only practical option is to write a letter pleading for Onesimus to be treated fairly. Whilst Onesimus stayed in Rome, Paul found him to be quite useful indeed. With the many visitors that Paul was having, perhaps Onesimus was kept busy in attending to the things of Paul's household. Clearly, Paul "...wished to keep (him) with me, that ... he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel..." (13 NKJV)

Paul's will on the matter was that Philemon would take Onesimus back, and he pleads with Philemon "...I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you..." (12 NIV). Whilst Paul would have liked to keep him, it was not right and proper that he should do so (even if it had been possible). Morally he needed the consent of Philemon. However, there is a problem. Paul could not have phoned Philemon to ask permission (nor sent an email). He would have had to send a letter with a courier, and then wait for a response. If the answer was no, then he would have had to dispatch Onesimus at that time. Given Paul's circumstances, he sends Onesimus with the letter, along with Tychicus. "...But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary..." (14 NKJV)

Paul was convicted that God's hand was at work in the matter of Onesimus, and he uses a tactful phrase contrasting his temporary departure with his permanent reunion – provided of course, that Philemon agreed to take him back. "... Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good..." (15 NIV).

However, Philemon should receive him back "...no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother..." (16 NKJV). In contrast to the way that Onesimus used to work (...who once was unprofitable to you...) (11) his new birth has turned his life around, and he will now be profitable "...both in the flesh and in the Lord..." (16 NKJV).

Paul's final plea is to receive Onesimus back in exactly the same way that Paul would be received if (when) he came "...So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me..." (17 NIV).

Onesimus' debt

Most likely, Onesimus had robbed Philemon to have the money he needed to escape to Rome. Paul says that anything that Onesimus owed should be transferred to his own account “...*If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me...*” (18 NIV). He then emphasises the offer by confirming it in his own handwriting. “...*I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back...*” (19 NIV).

However, he reminds Philemon of the indebtedness that he owes to Paul! Here we have a very strong hint that Paul had had some contact with Philemon – and probably had converted him, since he says “...*you owe me even your own self...*” (19 NKJV). If that was the case, then it would be most likely that Philemon was converted by Paul during his three years in Ephesus (since Paul hasn't been to Colosse). Paul emphasises Philemon's debt to him again “...*I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord...*” (20 NIV).

In his final pleas to Philemon, Paul expresses the confidence that he would do the right thing and “...*refresh my heart in the lord...*” (20 NKJV). Paul writes that he has “...*confidence in your obedience, ... knowing that you will do even more than I say...*” (21 NKJV).

Paul's argument is to transfer Onesimus' debt to Paul – but in doing so, do not forget the debt that you already owe to me! Of course, Paul wants Philemon to take Onesimus back debt-free, and uses some “manipulative” techniques to ensure that he does just that.

Travel plans and greetings

Paul unhesitatingly asks Philemon to prepare a room for him. He is confident that he will come to visit, and that it will not be very far in the future. This places the time of the letter as late in the first Roman imprisonment. “...*And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers...*” (22 NIV).

Paul's offer to repay Philemon any debt that Onesimus owed him also shows Paul's optimism at being released. Whilst under house arrest, Paul would have no income, and no ability to pay (although he did have sufficient financial resources to rent a house (Acts 28:30)). But after his release, Paul would be able to work to support himself, and pay back any debt to Philemon.

After release from his first imprisonment, Paul expected to go to Philippi again (Php 1:26; 2:24), with tradition also suggesting another trip into the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. A brief account of Paul's fourth missionary journey is given in the introductory study for Ephesians.

Conybeare & Howson² suggest that upon leaving Rome, Paul went to Macedonia, and then to Ephesus. Whilst there he visited Colossae and Laodicea.

Almost the same group of friends are named here as with the Colossian letter – Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

² Conybeare, WJ & Howson, JS “The Life and Epistles of St Paul” Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Mi. ISBN 0-8028-8086-X p.745