

# **A Little But Powerful Letter: Philemon**

## **Greetings**

Though Paul was a prisoner of Rome, he considered his bonds to be a means of furthering Christ's cause (Philemon 1, 9, 10, 22-23; Philippians 1:12-14). Timothy was with Paul at the time of writing. He may have written down the apostle's words as he dictated them to him. This, the shortest of all Paul's letters is primarily written to a Christian man and his family. Philemon's name means "beloved." Paul calls him beloved out of respect for this man of God. He also identifies him as a fellow laborer because of his efforts to advance the cause of Christ. Apphia was certainly a Christian and likely was the wife of Philemon. Archippus appears to have been their son. He was a gospel preacher in the city of Laodicea (1-2; Colossians 4:16-17).

The aging apostle greeted the church meeting in Philemon's house. Paul desired God's unmerited favor for them. He also wanted them to have the peace of mind that comes with that grace. Of course, Jesus was God's means of delivering grace and peace to man (3; Luke 2:14; Philippians 4:6-7).

## **Philemon's Love and Faith**

Paul regularly thanked God for Philemon as he approached the throne of grace in prayer (4).

Here again we have an indication of the prayerfulness of the apostle Paul. Not only that, but we are reminded that he prayed for his friends. Paul was definite and specific in his prayers. Many of our prayers are so general that they are meaningless, but Paul prayed for definite people (Roy H. Lanier, Sr., Teacher's Annual Lesson Commentary on Bible School Lessons 1956, pp. 168-169).

Paul had heard of Philemon's love, for the Lord and His saints, as well as his faith. Both of these would have been evident in his conduct. It seems likely Paul had gotten his information from Onesimus. This slave had run away from the household of Philemon. It should be observed the information is positive, so he likely spoke well of his master (5).

Philemon's love for Christ had caused him to show love for the brethren by sharing with them. Paul's prayer was that such sharing would be effective because it could be the means of showing others the blessings Christians have in Christ Jesus. It filled Paul with joy to know of such sharing. He knew the saints, those set apart in Christ's church, had been given rest and relief. How appropriate for Paul to call such a man brother. After all, his display of love for others had made him a true brother to all in God's family (6-7).

## **A Special Request for Onesimus**

Knowing Philemon shared out of love for the brethren, Paul made a request. As an

apostle, he could have commanded but he set it forth as a plea based upon the love found in the family of God. Philemon had been especially good at demonstrating love for the other members of the body. Paul was a good example of such love himself since he was an old man in bonds for the Lord. Those bonds had given him many opportunities to show love for lost souls by proclaiming the message of salvation (8-9).

Paul had converted a runaway slave named Onesimus. He had been born into the kingdom of Christ while Paul was in chains (10: John 3:1-7; Romans 6:3-4). Coffman quotes J. B. Lightfoot who said even small offenses committed by slaves could result in scourging, mutilation, crucifixion or being thrown to wild beasts. Naturally, the apostle was pleading that none of those things should happen. Onesimus, whose name ironically means "profitable," had once been useless to Philemon because he had run away. However, he now was profitable to both his master and the apostle (10-11).

Paul knew Philemon's rights as a slave owner and sent Onesimus back (Colossians 3:22-4:1). The apostle helped Onesimus realize becoming a Christian meant turning away from all sin. Paul stressed how special this slave had become to him by calling him his own heart. The apostle informed Philemon that Onesimus had been serving him just as his master would have if he had been present. He would have liked to keep him. He could have continued ministering to the apostle while he labored in chains. Yet, he could not do such without the consent of Philemon. He did not want any action to be out of necessity but a freewill offering. After all, God loves a cheerful giver (12-14; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

Though Paul strongly believed in God's providence, he was unwilling to say positively this was an instance of it in action. It may have been the master was parted from his slave by God for a short time so he could receive him back for the rest of his life. Actually, the word "forever" may even suggest the Christian brotherhood they could enjoy beyond the grave. Onesimus was, at this time, much more than Philemon's slave. He, by the new birth, had become a brother in the Lord to Paul and his master. Now, they knew the master-slave relationship in the flesh because it was recognized as legal by the government. However, that relationship was improved by their both being a part of the Lord's body by acceptance of the Divine decree (15-16).

### **Philemon Encouraged**

Remember, Paul considered Philemon to be a fellow worker, or partner, in the spreading of the gospel (verse 1). On the basis of such a partnership, Philemon should have been ready to receive one of Paul's converts as he would receive Paul himself (17). Paul realized there might have been some financial loss which resulted from Onesimus' flight. When one master bought a slave from another, any debts owed by that slave to his former master were paid by his new master. Paul had received service from Onesimus and was willing to assume his debts (18).

It is impossible to know if Paul wrote the entire letter himself or just picked up the pen to write a few words at the end. In either case, Philemon was assured of Paul's intent to repay whatever was owed. If Philemon was one of Paul's converts, as we suppose, the debt he owed Paul for bringing him the gospel could be considered far greater than any monetary debt. After all, salvation would involve Philemon's eternal welfare. Christ had taken up that debt when no

means of repayment was available to Philemon. That wonderful offer was made known to him through Paul, Christ's minister (19).

In verse 7, Paul had indicated Philemon was known for relieving the saints. Paul uses such as a basis of appeal in this case. The word for "joy" is the verbal form of Onesimus' name. This could be a play on words used by Paul to ask for the slave to be sent back to help in his time of imprisonment. The most important thing, however, was for Philemon's actions to be appropriate and pleasing to the Lord (20).

Though the request was made out of friendship and not by command, Paul was certain Philemon would comply with and even go beyond what had been asked. This could have been a closing plea for the return of Onesimus or simply mean Paul knew Onesimus would be received in the best possible manner (21). Paul expressed his desire to visit Philemon if he was released. If Paul was going to come, Philemon would have wanted to deal with all matters in a way which would please his friend. Notice, Paul realized any release would come because of the Lord. Therefore, he requested continued prayers for his release. God will work, but man should never forget to do as he requires (22).

### **Closing Remarks**

In the Colossian letter (1:7; 4:12), Epaphras is portrayed as one of the Colossians and a minister among them. He, like Paul, was imprisoned. He joined Paul in sending greetings to this good family and the church meeting in their house. John Mark and Aristarchus were two Jewish Christians Paul mentioned in Colossians 4:10-11. Demas and Luke were Greek traveling companions mentioned just a few verses later in the same letter. They all desired to send their greetings as well. Paul also sent his greetings in the form of an expressed personal desire. He wanted all those who had been mentioned in the salutation to receive God's unmerited favor and Christ's abiding presence (23-25).

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does Philemon's name mean? How does Paul use that meaning in addressing the letter?
2. How did Paul view his bonds?
3. Who might Apphia have been? Who might Archippus have been? What task did he perform in Laodicea?
4. Who else did Paul greet in this letter? What was his wish for them?
5. What do you think Paul thought of Philemon? What verses support your answer?

6. What had Paul heard about Philemon? How did he hope he would grow?
7. What appeal did Paul present to Philemon?
8. How did Paul feel about Onesimus? What verses support your answer?
9. What incident did Paul think might have been providential?
10. What was Paul willing to do to restore Philemon and Onesimus to a right relationship?
11. What hope did Paul express toward the end of the letter? How did he expect such hope to become reality?
12. What individuals joined Paul in the greetings at the end of the letter? Tell a few facts about them.