**Simple Studies**

**in**

**Philemon**

**By**

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**Introduction**

This letter was written by Paul from the Roman prison at the same time as the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. The three letters were sent from Rome by the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus.

As we begin the study of Philemon, let me point at once to what I believe is the keynote of the Epistle. I refer to the phrase, “in the flesh,” in **Phm. 1:16**. To me this phrase establishes beyond doubt that Philemon and his slave Onesimus were brothers “in the flesh.” That is to say, they were sons of the same father and mother. If Paul had intended to say this, I do not see how he could have said it in plainer language,—“a brother beloved, both in the flesh, and in the Lord.”

It is not at all impossible that Onesimus could have been Philemon’s brother as well as his slave. Let us draw the picture: Here, let us say, were two sons in the same family who had not the same ability. Philemon became a prosperous man while his brother was not prosperous. It would be natural for the prosperous brother to help the other, and one can see how the less prosperous brother might finally have become so deeply indebted that he became his brother’s slave. This, of course, would be before either of them had become a Christian.

Philemon was a man of some prominence in Colosse. He certainly was, a slaveholder and he evidently had a larger house that many other Christian brethren, for the church met in his house (**Phm. 1:2**).

We have no record that Paul ever visited Colosse, for the Scriptures never mention the city except in **Col. 1:2**. From **Col. 2:1** it appears that Paul was not known personally to the believers in that city. And yet it seems evident from **Phm. 1:19** that Philemon himself had been led to Christ by the apostle.

Let us put our hypothesis to the test, and see how it works out. Assuming for the moment that the hypothetical solution of the problem is the correct one, the situation in Colosse would be something like this: Philemon had become a Christian, and was a leading figure in the Colossian church, but he had not freed his brother, and Onesimus was still kept in slavery. This, of course, would cloud Philemon’s testimony in Colosse, and in a measure it would cloud also the testimony of the Colossian church in the community. Men would say, “Why is it that this man, with his high profession of Christianity, does not see the incongruity of keeping his own brother in slavery?”

You see, we do not get rid of all our grave clothes at once, and Philemon was no exception. The name “Onesimus” means “profitable,” and Philemon might have reasoned that Onesimus was more profitable to him in slavery than in freedom.

Onesimus runs away. He is accused by practically all the commentators of stealing from Philemon before he ran away. This does not seem to be proven, though there is an intimation in **Phm. 1:18** that it might have been true. All roads led $o Rome, and Onesimus found his way to Rome. How he came into contact with the Apostle Paul in prison is not revealed. He may himself have been a lawbreaker, and thus a prisoner in the same prison with Paul. In any event we do know that in that contact Onesimus himself became a Christian. Paul led him to Christ and became his father in the gospel.

Whether the apostle had known before this, he certainly came to know now, of the double relation between Philemon and Onesimus, and he seized upon the golden opportunity to set things right for Philemon and the church in Colosse. He wrote a letter and sent it to Colosse by Onesimus; and that letter we now know as “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Philemon.”

***I. The Salutation (1-3).***

1. “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in thy house: grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (**Phm. 1:1-2**). There may be a play upon words in the phrase, “our dearly beloved,” for the name “Philemon” comes from a root meaning “to kiss.” Dr. James

H. Brookes defines the name Philemon as meaning, “who kisses in love.” Apphia was probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus their son. Archippus is mentioned in Col. 4:17 in such a way as to intimate that he might have been taking Epaphras’ place as elder or bishop, that is, the pastor, in the church at Colosse, while Epaphras was with Paul in Rome. It has been suggested also that Archippus might have been a military man, and so he is greeted here as a soldier.

2. "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (**Phm. 1:3**). There is always danger that we shall become so familiar with these words as to fail to appreciate them. Only think of having God for your Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, and to have them uniting in such a greeting as this: “Grace to you, and peace!”

***II. Paul’s Desire for Philemon (4-14).***

1. “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers” (**Phm. 1:4-5**). He had heard of Philemon’s love and faith which he had toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints, and therefore he put his name on his prayer list (compare **1Jn. 3:14**).

2. “That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus” (**Phm 1:6-7**). Now let us look at this verse carefully. “Communication” means sharing what you have with others. Paul prayed that the sharing of Philemon’s faith might become effectual in the church and community by the acknowledging of every good thing which was in him in Christ Jesus. Consider that carefully. Paul believes in Philemon. He believes that he is a true Christian, and he declares that he has great joy and consolation in Philemon’s love, “because the bowels (or, the hearts) of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.” But what Paul wanted to accomplish was the acknowledgment by others of the good things which were really in Philemon. Philemon’s testimony was hindered, and his neighbors did not recognize the good things which were in him. Paul, in this letter, hoped to overcome this difficulty and to set things right, so that Philemon might be acknowledged everywhere as a true Christian and faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus” (**Phm. 1:8-14**). The apostle reminds Philemon that he really had the right to enjoin him or to command him that which was befitting. But for love’s sake he preferred to beseech him, “being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” He made intercession for his son Onesimus, whom he had begotten in his bonds. The name Onesimus, as we have already seen, means “profitable.” In time past he had not lived up to his name, and was unprofitable, but now he had become profitable, both to Philemon and to Paul himself. Paul sends him again and says, “Receive him, that is, mine own bowels (my very heart, RV).” Paul would have been glad to keep Onesimus with him that he might serve him in the bonds of the gospel. But he was not willing to do this without Philemon’s consent, that his benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

***III. From Slavery to Brotherhood (15-25).***

1. “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou should receive him forever,” (**Phm. 1:15**). Slavery is not necessarily a permanent thing, but a brother never stops being a brother. That relation goes on forever.

2. “Not now as a servant” (**Phm. 1:16**). The word for “servant” is bondservant or slave. Paul now is beseeching Philemon to receive Onesimus, “not now as a slave, but above a slave, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?” Onesimus had become a brother in the Lord to Paul, and so he was especially beloved of Paul. But Philemon had a double reason for loving him, because he was Philemon’s brother, both by natural generation and by regeneration, “both in the flesh, and in the Lord.”

3. “If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself” (**Phm. 1:17**). How would Philemon receive Paul if he were to come to Colosse? Would he send him to the slave pen, or to the guest chamber?

4. “If he has wronged thee, or owes thee ought, to put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owe unto me even thine own self besides” (**Phm. 1:18-19**). Here is the doctrine of imputation beautifully illustrated. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. Paul says to Philemon, “If this man owes you anything, charge it to me.” That is imputation. And when Philemon charged the account to Paul, if there was anything to charge, then Onesimus’ debt was cancelled, and he stood before Philemon in the name and credit of Paul himself. So it is with us. Our debt was paid on Calvary, and we are set free, delivered from slavery and brought into brotherhood in the family of God.

5. “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord; refresh my bowels (my heart) in the Lord” (**Phm. 1:20**). The passionate tone characterizing this letter would be incomprehensible if Paul were merely interceding for one who had been a slave, and was to continue as a slave. But when it is seen that he is interceding for a brother to be released from slavery and recognized and installed as a brother beloved, and when it is further seen what effect this would have upon Philemon’s testimony and the testimony of the church in the city and community of Colosse and surrounding communities, then it is easily understood why Paul should feel the matter so keenly and should plead with such earnestness, as one who must not be denied.

6. “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote” (**Phm. 1:21**). The Revision reads: “Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say.” It is interesting to note that while in **Phm. 1:8-9** Paul said he would not command in this matter, but rather beseech, yet in this 21st verse he says in effect, “I expect you to obey me.”

7. “But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you” (**Phm. 1:22**). He hoped to be released from prison and to come to Colosse, and in such a case he could check up and see whether Onesimus was still in bondage to his brother, or was in his rightful place in his brother’s home.

The Epistle closes with words of personal salutation and the apostolic benediction.