

Paul's letter

To

Philemon



Bible Study Series

By

Victor A. Tawadrose

www.oasisoflivingwater.com

Paul's Letter to Philemon

This is the only personal one in between all the letters that Paul wrote. He may have written many others, but this is the one that survived and found its way to be accepted as authentic and canonized.

The letter itself is very short, and so it was not divided in chapters.

Before we study the Scripture itself, I would like to tell it as a story; not as other stories but as a touching event that shows the work of God's grace and its effects on the different subjects involved.

It tells us the story of a runaway slave called Onesimus and his master Philemon who lived in Colosse, Laodicea, or Hierapolis, which were so close to each other that they were considered one community.

It happened that Onesimus wronged his master, it is not clear what he had done, but most probably he stole money or something of the sort; and being afraid of punishment he ran away several hundred miles to the big city of Rome where he would not be easily recognized in between the other millions of slaves, for it was a well known fact that there were sixty million slaves in the whole Roman Empire, a good number of them were owned by the nobles and the, governors, and all the high-ranked officers and people of dignity and authority.

It is not recorded how he got to know Paul, but most probably he heard about him from a fellow slave who may have told him about Paul's wisdom and convincing preaching about a prophet that was crucified and then raised from death. So he went and visited Paul in prison who must have talked to him about Jesus Christ and was converted; and he became attached to him that he stayed serving him.

Every thing went smooth and uneventful till he was recognized by someone who we do not know, but some scholars believe that it was Epaphras who is from Colosse and visited Paul in prison and recognized Onesimus as the runaway slave. So Paul knew his story; and all of a sudden he finds himself in a very difficult situation between a stone and hard rock, because being a God fearing person, he could and would not harbor a criminal. On the other hand informing about him to the authorities puts Paul in the position of betrayer to his friend, the thing which certainly would disappoint his friend even to the extent of losing faith. But God always supplies help in time of need, so He inspired Paul to send him back to his master for reconciliation. Of course Paul must have discussed this solution with Onesimus, and convinced him that this is the best solution for his problem, telling him that he will write a letter of recommendation to his master Philemon and that he is sure that he will accept him back without any ill feeling or grudge. Obviously Onesimus accepted this solution may be reluctantly, or may that he was also sure that his master is kind and merciful. So Paul wrote this short letter which is firm, precise and to the point, telling Philemon that he is sure that as a

good Christian he will accept Onesimus not as a slave who has done wrong, but as a brother in Christ.. Then he says a good word about Onesimus, that he is so useful to him that he wished to keep him, but he wouldn't do that without his permission, and that if he keeps him he will be useful and beneficial for you and me; and here Paul is playing with words because the word Onesimus in Greek means useful and beneficial. He added that if he had wronged you in anything, he will repay in person putting his name as a guarantee.

There is an interesting view that one scholar puts here. He says that Paul did not put the burden of decision solely on Philemon's shoulders, but he put it in the hands of the church as well. And he supports his view by the fact that Paul in verse 2 sends his greetings to Archippus "our fellow soldier" which means that he ministered to the community in question which would be Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis as mentioned before, moreover his name was also mentioned in the epistle to the Colossians 4:17. In this way, Onesimus had a better chance to be accepted not only by his master, but by the community as well.

Was there any risk in doing that? Yes, of course; for the slave in the ancient world was a possession, a living tool, has no saying what so ever, and his master has complete and absolute power to do whatever he wishes with him especially if he was a runaway. He can torture him with no limit even to death, or at best he can be put in prison for life and dies there. Yes, there was a great risk in sending him back, and Paul was well aware of it; but this is a lot better than delivering him to the authorities in Rome, where he would have been put in prison or sent back to his master where his end would be one of the above, had Paul have not sent him for reconciliation and forgiveness.

Then Paul puts his last plead to Philemon in verses 20 and 21 saying "Let me have this benefit from you in the Lord, confident in your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say".

Here comes the best part of the story which is not mentioned in the Holy Scripture, but tradition tells us that about fifty years later, Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs passing by Ephesus on his way from Antioch to Rome to be executed, wrote a letter saying how wonderful was the Bishop of Ephesus whose name was Onesimus, and makes the same remark as Paul wrote in this short letter, that "he is Onesimus by name and by nature, the one who is profitable to Christ".

If this Onesimus is the runaway slave, it shows us the effective work of God's grace! How did this little papyrus paper that contained this short letter survived, and how did it get in the Pauline collection of letters? For sure Paul must have written several other personal letters, but isn't it amazing that this is the only letter that survived?

It is practically certain that the first collection of Paul's letters was made at Ephesus about the turn of the century; and it was just then that Onesimus was bishop of Ephesus, and it may well be that it was he who insisted that this letter be included in the collection, in order that all might know what the grace of God had done for him. Through it the bishop tells the world that once he was a runaway slave and that he owed his life to Paul and to Jesus Christ.

If all this is true, it tells us that Onesimus was forgiven by his two masters, the heavenly and the earthly; and that what was considered a great risk became a blessing. How unsearchable are Your judgments O, Lord, and Your ways past finding out? (Rom. 11:33)

Now we get to study the Scripture.

Verses 1-7:

We must understand from the beginning that Paul is sending this letter to ask for a favor, not for him, but for a friend. He is pleading for a runaway slave who has done wrong to his master, and may face death if he is not forgiven.

Paul is very tactful; he is the one who said "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself servant to all that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law that I might win those who are under the law; to the weak, I became as weak that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. (1st Cor. 9:19-22). So here he omitted the official introduction and talking as a friend to a friend. So instead of saying "Paul the apostle of Christ by the will of God" as he usually does, he writes "Paul a prisoner of Jesus Christ". So by doing that, he immediately makes his appeal not to an authority, but to a friend asking in love.

We do not know for sure who Apphia and Archippus are, but it has been suggested that it could be Philemon's wife and his son, since they would be interested in the return of Onesimus, and what could happen to him especially if they have missed him.

As for Philemon himself, he must have been a good man with the Christian love implanted in his heart, as Paul says in verse 5 "Hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. Paul must have heard all about him from Onesimus. Then verse 6 is a little difficult to understand depending on which version and translation we read, but it simply means "I pray that your way of generously sharing all that you have, will lead you more and more deeply into the knowledge of the good things which lead to Christ. Then he says in verse 7, that the hearts of the saints are refreshed by your love and generosity,

Verses 8-17:

A favor is not a favor if unless it is given freely and with goodwill. So Paul humbly requests; he does not command or demand, though in other circumstances he may have the right to do so. He appeals for love's sake as an aged man and a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Then he says, it is not for me but for Onesimus, my son whom I have brought to life while I am in prison; who once was useless but now he is useful to you and to me. Isn't it amazing how Christ makes good out of the bad? It is true that Christianity makes people heavenly-minded and useful upon earth at the same time. To bring someone to Christ is as great as to bring a child into the world. And in verse 12, the Greek meaning of the phrase "sending him back" is "I am referring his case for your verdict", so receive him as if you are receiving me for he is my own heart. Paul must have got so attached to Onesimus that he considers him as his heart. Then in verse 13, Paul says that he wished to keep Onesimus, but he wouldn't do that without Philemon's permission. This is very significant because Christianity does not

encourage people to escape from their mistakes, but to go back and face the consequences of his doing. Christianity is never escape, but it is always conquest. Jesus did not escape from death but he faced it and conquered it.

Onesimus left home a runaway criminal, but he comes back completely changed; he knew Jesus Christ, and he is now a brother. It may be very difficult for Philemon to accept that, but that is exactly what Paul requests; as if he is saying "if you agree that I am your partner in the work of Christ and that Onesimus is my son in our mutual faith, then you must receive him as you would receive me.

God forgives sinners why don't we?

Verses 18-25:

Christianity never entitles anyone to default on debts. So Paul writes by his own hand that he will repay all in full. Paul must have the resources to pay Onesimus' debts. We know that he had the means to rent a house on his own during the two years imprisonment in Rome waiting for his trial at Caesar's judgment seat, and we also know that Felix kept him in prison in Caesarea hoping for a monetary bribe from him.

If that is so, then we must appreciate how much he had sacrificed for the sake of Christ. Then in verses 19-20, we cannot help but observing Paul's sense of humor where he tells Philemon "you owe your soul to me (referring to how he brought him to Christ), won't you let me make some profit out of you now? And in verse 21 he shows his complete confidence that Philemon would grant his request. And in verse 22, he again shows his complete confidence that through prayers of his friends he will be set free and asks to prepare a room for him. Then in verses 13-25 there is a list of greetings.

One last thing I feel I should discuss before closing:

I have come across so many Christians who feel that Paul advocates class distinction, and approves slavery; otherwise he should have called for freedom from slavery, especially in writing this letter since it deals with a runaway slave and his master. We should not be hasty to judge or criticize. First of all there is time for every thing and the wise person knows when to pick the proper time. Secondly one should study the background and circumstances of the subject in discussion, and that is what we are going to do now.

Some of what I shall say may be a repetition; nevertheless, sometimes one has to do that for the flow of thoughts, and discussion.

As mentioned before, the number of slaves in the Roman Empire was estimated to be 60 million; which far exceeded double, triple, or even quadruple the number of the free Romans. A good number of these were not of the black race; they were captives from all the countries invaded, subdued, and occupied by the Roman Empire. These of course were watching and waiting for the time when they can go back to their countries, and join their lost families. And slaves of such a huge number composed a great threat to the Empire if it ever happened that they rioted, the thing which have certainly happened if Paul called for freedom of slaves. They were oppressed, ill-treated, and have no rights whatsoever, but the whole economy and administration of the whole Empire depended solely and totally on them. They did everything from domestic to field to civil to teaching to medicine to legal to public work, simply because their masters had

no time for such a thing, they were busy drinking, eating, socializing and attending parties.

For Paul or any Christian leader to condemn slavery will do much damage and harm both to the slaves and to the Christians because:

- 1) It will paralyze the whole Empire
- 2) It will encourage the slaves to rebel.
- 3) It will force the Government to take drastic forcible actions against the slaves such as beating, imprisonment, and even killing if necessary to restore order.
- 4) The government will also take drastic actions against the Christians who were already hiding underground and in catacombs, just to be able to freely worship. Add to that, they were already persecuted by Nero who blamed them for the burning of Rome to cover his wrong doing.
- 5) All of that could have led to chaos and even civil war.
- 6) If one or all of the above had happened, Christianity would have lost its credibility, and could even be history, and you and me would have never heard of salvation, and died in our sins.

But Paul as a wise master builder, and of course through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, left the matter in the hands of God, until the time when Christianity and its loving –promoting doctrines permeated slowly in the world, and slaves were freed voluntarily without riot or force and still at the hands of Christians all over the civilized world..

God Bless you