

The Epistle to Philemon.

INTRODUCTION

There was a man in first-century Rome who had occasion to write a short letter to a friend, in which he requested his friend to forgive one of his domestic servants who had wronged him.

That man's name began with the letter 'P', but, contrary to what some of you are thinking, the name of the man I have in mind was not Paul.

His name was Pliny,¹ and the letter was not, therefore, the New Testament epistle to Philemon.



Pliny was a lawyer and magistrate in ancient Rome. He wrote very many letters, of which no less than 247 survive to this day.²

The following are a few brief extracts from Pliny's letter to his friend, Sabinianus:

Your freedman [that is, a former slave whom Sabinianus had freed but who was still dependent on him— 'one degree above a slave'³] came to me and ... earnestly requested me ... to intercede for him.

I am persuaded he is a changed character, because he really does feel that he did wrong. I know you are angry with him, and ... not without reason; let me prevail with you to pardon him ... I am nervous that, by joining my appeal with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. But I'm going to do it anyway ... Farewell.⁴

We shall have occasion to refer back to Pliny's letter several times later.

But, for now, and by way of contrast, we turn to Paul's 'divinely inspired' epistle to Philemon.

SCRIPTURE READING

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,⁵ and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow-worker, and Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and the church in your house.

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

I thank my God⁶ always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith in the Lord Jesus.⁷

I pray that the practical expression of your fellowship which springs from your faith may result in the deepening of your understanding of every good thing which is ours in Christ.

For I have derived much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you, being Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I appeal to you for my child, whom I have fathered in my bonds, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my own heart—back to you.

I would have wished to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf while I am in bonds for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness should not be of necessity but willingly.

For this is perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a while,⁸ that you might have him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but even more so to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

If then you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you in any way, or if he owes you anything, charge that to my account.

I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it—not to say that you owe to me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some profit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I hope that through your prayers I shall be graciously granted to you.

Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

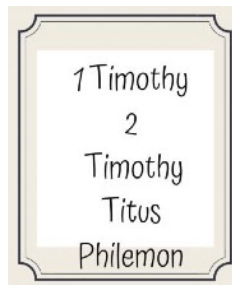
BACKGROUND

(i) The letter

Although the letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's surviving letters, we should note that:

'The length of Philemon, a mere 335 words in Greek, approximates the average length of a letter in the Roman, Greek, and Jewish worlds of the first century'.⁹

Paul's epistle to Philemon has been placed in our Bibles after his epistle to Titus, which forms the last of the three so-called 'Pastoral Epistles'.



Interestingly, although each of the Pastoral Epistles is addressed to individuals, they are not concerned with personal matters but rather with matters concerning the life and practice of the local church.

Paul's epistle to Philemon stands in contrast in that, although directed primarily at Philemon,¹⁰ it is addressed also to a local church, and yet it is concerned with a personal matter.

We know next to nothing about the background to the epistle beyond what we learn from the epistle itself. The only outside connection is with the epistle to the Colossians, which mentions both the Onesimus and the Archippus of our epistle by name.¹¹

It is not possible, therefore, to be dogmatic about the detailed circumstances which led to the writing of the epistle.

For my part, I am happy to go along with the traditional attempt to fill in the blanks, and to paint the background as below.

When the apostle Paul wrote the epistle, he was still under house arrest in Rome, pending trial before Emperor Nero. It is there, in his own hired dwelling, that Luke (to whom, you may have noticed, Paul refers in his final greetings¹²) last mentions him at the close of his Book of Acts.¹³



Philemon's home was about 930 miles¹⁴ to the east, in Colossae, a small town in the Roman province of Asia (now Eastern Turkey). He was sufficiently well-to-do to own a house large enough to accommodate the local church¹⁵ and to provide at least one guest room for visitors.¹⁶

(ii) Onesimus – the slave

Doubtless, as all men of means, Philemon had a number of slaves. We know that, at the time, slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire; 'As many as a third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres would have been slaves'.¹⁷

Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's gospel ministry,¹⁸ in all likelihood when Paul was based at Ephesus some seven or eight years earlier.

'Though the Apostle himself was stationary in the capital, the Apostle's influence and teaching spread far beyond the limits of the city and its immediate neighbourhood. It was hardly an exaggeration when Demetrius declared that "almost throughout all Asia this Paul had persuaded and turned away much people".¹⁹ The sacred historian himself uses equally strong language²⁰ in describing the effects of the Apostle's preaching: "All they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks".²¹

And we can assume that, as a Christian, Philemon would have been no cruel slave-master, but would have treated each of his slaves in a 'just and fair' manner.²²

And yet, for some reason (possibly, simply to obtain his freedom), one of Philemon's slaves, 'Onesimus' by name, fled from Philemon's home.²³ But Onesimus not only ran away; he also stole some of his master's money or goods – in all likelihood, to fund his escape. For an escaping slave needed to obtain food, drink, and shelter:

'How do they, when they run off, leave their masters? ... Do they not, after carrying off a little with them for the first days, travel over land and sea, contriving first one, then another, method of getting food?'²⁴

By way of example, 'The runaway slave Sarapion ... purloined "some items of clothing" before departure'.²⁵

Like countless other runaway slaves, Onesimus fled to Rome, attempting to lose himself in the Imperial capital's teeming slave population.

'In the thronging crowds of the metropolis was his best hope of secrecy'.²⁶

As is often said: 'All roads lead to Rome'.²⁷ And, in spite of the considerable distance from Colossae to Rome, travelling would be comparatively easy and unobserved, provided Onesimus stuck to the main lines of communication. The stream flowed forward and backward from the provinces to Rome, and fugitives naturally went 'with the flow'.

(iii) Onesimus – the convert

When in Rome, through circumstances not recorded in Scripture (whether by design or by accident we do not know), Onesimus providentially²⁸ came into contact with Paul, and was converted.²⁹

Before long, he proved himself to be very 'useful'—very 'profitable'—to Paul,³⁰ providing him with valuable support and service.³¹ In that his name, 'Onesimus', means 'useful', 'profitable', it had been well said that, at that time, 'His character had finally caught up with his name'.³²

The apostle took the runaway slave, now true to his name, to his heart³³ and would gladly have kept him with him in Rome.³⁴ Yet Paul knew, not only that Roman law required runaway slaves to be returned to their owners,³⁵ but also that it would have been morally wrong for him to have held on to Onesimus without Philemon's express permission.³⁶ Apart from which, Paul suspected that God may well have overruled all of the circumstances to the end that Philemon might have Onesimus back for the rest of his life and now as a brother in Christ.³⁷

(iv) Onesimus – the road back

And so Paul sent him back to ...



... and to Philemon.³⁸

But Onesimus was not left to face Philemon alone. For Paul saw to it that he returned with:

- (i) a well-regarded companion (Tychicus, by name) to vouch for him³⁹ and
- (ii) a personal letter,⁴⁰ urging Philemon to receive Onesimus, not only as 'a beloved brother'⁴¹ but also as he would have received and welcomed Paul himself.⁴²



Well, so much for the background to Paul's letter.

EXPOSITION

Verses 1-7

It has been said of Onesimus: 'Being now, through (Paul's) preaching, reconciled to God, (Paul) labours for reconciliation between him and his master'.⁴³

But how, we might wonder, is Paul going to approach this delicate task?

Paul begins to build his case in his opening thanksgiving and prayer:⁴⁴

(i) He notes Philemon's 'love for all the saints',⁴⁵ without discrimination, including, necessarily, the Christian slaves in the Colossian church.⁴⁶ In that Onesimus has now become a Christian,⁴⁷ Paul has every reason to expect that Philemon's love will embrace him.

(ii) He says that he prays concerning 'the practical expression' of Philemon's 'fellowship',⁴⁸ thereby paving the way for his forthcoming appeal that Philemon should act in a similarly generous way towards Onesimus ... where Paul picks up, in another form, the word 'fellowship' in his appeal to Philemon as his 'partner'.⁴⁹

(iii) He draws attention to the joy and encouragement which he derives from the way in which Philemon has 'refreshed' 'the hearts ('the deep emotions and innermost feelings') of the saints'.⁵⁰ This provides the springboard from which he will later exhort Philemon to do the same again, but then for himself—'refresh my heart in Christ'⁵¹—by welcoming Onesimus back as a brother in the Lord.⁵²

When the apostle grasps the nettle, so to speak, and enters his impassioned plea for Onesimus, he begins by appealing to Philemon's feelings of sympathy ... by speaking of himself as 'an old man'⁵³ and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus'.⁵⁴ It is noticeable that he had opened his letter by calling himself just that; 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus'.⁵⁵

Although this is one of several letters which Paul wrote in custody about this time,⁵⁶ it is only here that he commences a letter by referring to himself as a 'prisoner' ... a 'prisoner', mark you, not so much of Caesar, but, in the deepest and truest sense, a 'prisoner of (and 'for') Christ Jesus'.



And this because, as later he makes clear, he is 'in bonds', not as a criminal, but for the sake of 'the gospel'.⁵⁷ And his repeated description of himself as a 'prisoner'⁵⁸ (which he explicitly asks Philemon, along with all others in the Colossian church, to 'remember'⁵⁹) is a subtle reminder to Philemon of the enormously high price which he is willing to pay personally for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Paul has every reason to expect, therefore, that, when he later makes his request to Philemon concerning Onesimus, Philemon will look on granting his request as *a very small sacrifice in comparison*.

Verses 8-9

Paul makes it clear that he does not want Philemon to take any action because he (Paul) commands it⁶⁰ ... that Philemon should not act out of 'necessity' ('compulsion').⁶¹ Rather, Paul shows him the 'more excellent way',⁶² appealing to him 'for love's sake',⁶³ which, in the context, I take to be a reference to Philemon's love.⁶⁴

Speaking of Paul's decision not to press his apostolic authority, Martin Luther observed that the apostle:

'lays aside *his rights* and thus compels Philemon, also, to waive *his rights*'.⁶⁵

Interestingly, Pliny also preferred to 'request' rather than to 'compel', appealing to the affection of his letter's recipient:

'You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again ... I am nervous that, by joining my appeal with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him'.⁶⁶

And I suspect that Philemon has no less cause to be angry with his servant that did Sabinianus with his:

'I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason'.⁶⁷

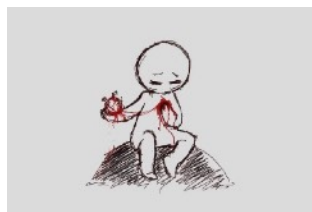
Verses 10-14

It is not until almost halfway through his letter that Paul actually reveals the name of its subject.⁶⁸ I find it interesting that, of the eleven persons mentioned in the letter,⁶⁹ the name 'Onesimus' comes in the middle, for he is very much its central character.

And I note that Paul is careful to withhold the *negative* information about Onesimus⁷⁰ until he has first presented the *positive* information, namely, that Onesimus had been converted⁷¹ and was now a changed man ... pointing out that the formerly 'useless' slave (i) had already proved himself 'useful' (which as we saw above was the meaning of his name) to Paul, and (ii) was potentially so also to Philemon.

Interestingly, in contrast to the comment of Pliny in his letter ('he really does feel that he did wrong'⁷²), Paul conveys no mention of any remorse on the part of the offender. But that, we can be sure, can be taken for granted. What matters now are not the feelings of Onesimus but the feelings of Paul.

For such is the deep love which he has for Onesimus that he can tell Philemon that, in releasing him to Philemon, he feels as if his very heart is being torn out: 'I am sending him—who is my own heart—back to you'.⁷³



And so, Paul proceeds to explain to Philemon why he is sending Onesimus back to him and why he finds this such a hard thing to do.⁷⁴

He makes it clear that, just as he had been willing (i) to waive *his rights and his authority* as an apostle, so now he is willing also (ii) to give up *his personal preferences*:

(i) 'Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required ... I *prefer* to appeal to you'.⁷⁵

(ii) 'I would have been glad to keep him with me ... but I *preferred* to do nothing without your consent'.⁷⁶

Although Paul highly prizes Onesimus and his service, and *stands only to lose by his departure*, yet he is willing to make that great sacrifice. How much more, then, should Philemon, who *stands only to gain by Onesimus's return*, be ready to receive him with open arms.



Determined that any action on Philemon's part should be entirely voluntary, Paul will, he says, do nothing without Philemon's express consent.

It has been said, and rightly so, that:

'Paul would not keep Onesimus without Philemon's approval, not only because he would break the law if he did so, but much more because it would be a breach of his friendship and Christian fellowship with Philemon'.⁷⁷

Verses 15-16

As I understand it, Paul then gives Philemon an additional reason for his decision not to retain Onesimus:

'For this is perhaps the reason he was separated from you⁷⁸ for a while, that you might have him forever'.⁷⁹

For all he knows, Paul explains, for him to have refused to part with Onesimus would have been for him to have resisted God's purpose.

'Suppose', the apostle is saying, 'that all these recent events (from the time that Onesimus was first parted from you⁸⁰ through to the time of his conversion) ... suppose that all these events formed part of God's providential working "behind the scenes" to the end that you and he might be brought together forever as brothers in Christ? In those circumstances, for me to have retained him here with me would have meant that I was opposing God's will – something I would not be willing to do'.

This was very true, of course, in Paul's case, but the observation also carried an unmistakeable message for Philemon. For, if God's overruling hand lay behind recent developments, then, clearly, it was God's design and desire that Philemon should receive Onesimus back as a Christian brother for keeps.⁸¹

And I note that, no sooner has Paul used the word 'slave' to describe the legal status of Onesimus, but he qualifies the term by adding, '*no longer as a slave but more than a slave*, as a beloved brother'.⁸²

It has been said of Onesimus that:

'socially, he was a slave ... morally, he was a thief ... and legally, he was an outlaw'.⁸³

True enough. But now, praise God, he has become something else, a brother beloved, to Paul – and to Philemon.

In one sense, therefore, it is a case of *one* brother entreating a *second* brother on behalf of a *third* brother, because, in truth, Philemon and Onesimus are in the same boat, in that they both had been led to the Lord through Paul.⁸⁴



The apostle can, therefore, speak of each of the men as his 'brother'.⁸⁵

Not, I hasten to add, that Paul is instructing Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a *freed man*, nor is he requiring Philemon to *manumit* (to release from slavery) *Onesimus* on his return. But rather that, whether or not Onesimus remains legally a slave, henceforth he is to be regarded—and to be treated—as a fellow-Christian.⁸⁶

In contrast, the *most* that Pliny could ask for the wayward young man of whom he wrote was that Sabinianus should pardon him:

‘Let me prevail with you to pardon him ... request you to forgive him’.⁸⁷

Pliny could ask no more than that.

Verses 17-20a

Thus far, Paul has proceeded cautiously and indirectly. Now he comes out into the open and makes his direct appeal. As Philemon’s ‘partner’,⁸⁸ he entreats Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome himself, Paul.⁸⁹

Previously, he has spoken of Onesimus as his spiritual ‘child’, as his very ‘heart’ and as his ‘beloved brother’.⁹⁰ Now he speaks of him as if he was himself: ‘Receive *him* as you would receive *me*’.

If, therefore, Onesimus has stood in for *Philemon* in the past *by helping Paul* in his bonds,⁹¹ he must stand in for *Paul* in the present *by meeting Philemon* in his house.

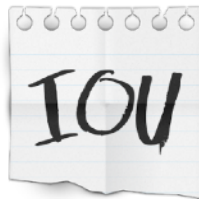
Having stated his request, Paul now turns to the practicalities of the situation.

He does not say (as Pliny did in effect), ‘He seems genuinely penitent, so I think you should *let him off*’. Far from it. On the contrary, Paul says, ‘If he owes you anything, *charge that to my account*’.⁹²

That is, he tells Philemon that he is not only to receive Onesimus *as if he is Paul*, but that he is to charge any amount owed to him by Onesimus to Paul’s account *as if Paul is Onesimus!*

And so, just as Onesimus had discharged a little of *Philemon’s debt to Paul* by serving him in his bonds, so now Paul offers to discharge the whole of *Onesimus’s debt to Philemon* by making good all that is owed to him.

And Paul even goes so far as to write a promissory note—an IOU—for Philemon, underwriting Onesimus’s entire debt.



But then he adroitly reminds Philemon⁹³ of the immeasurably greater debt which Philemon ‘owed’ to him ... ‘owed’ to the man who had once led him to the Lord:

‘not to say that you owe to me even your own self’.⁹⁴

The expression, ‘even your own self’, serves to underline the vast disparity between the two debts.

And, with those last words, Philemon suddenly finds himself propelled from being a *creditor* to being a *debtor*, owing Paul a debt which totally outweighs anything that Onesimus may owe him.

But, not only so. For Paul goes one step further. Still with the world of finance in mind, he adds (perhaps with a twinkle in his eye as he writes):

‘I want some profit⁹⁵ from you’.⁹⁶

‘I have a right’, Paul is saying, ‘to some benefit (‘to some return’, ‘to some dividend’) from my investment in you, Philemon. Let us call that benefit, “Onesimus”’.

Verses 20b-21

And, it is at this point that Paul harks back to his earlier words of praise for Philemon in respect of the refreshment and rest of heart which Philemon had given to many others; namely, that ‘the hearts of the saints have been *refreshed* through you, brother’.⁹⁷ Now, he implores, ‘*refresh my heart*’⁹⁸ ... ‘count me in’ ... ‘include me in the circle of that heart-refreshment, by receiving my spiritual child, Onesimus’.⁹⁹

And, finally, Paul encourages Philemon to do just that, not simply by expressing his confidence in Philemon's 'obedience' (in his positive response, that is, to Paul's request), but also by expressing his confidence that Philemon stood ready to go the extra mile—to 'do even more' than Paul asked—whatever that 'extra mile' might have meant in practice for himself (Philemon) and for Onesimus.

A digression – 'the church in your house'

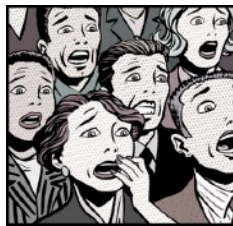
You will have gathered from my comments on page 4 above that I believe that Paul deliberately words his opening thanksgiving and prayer in verses 4 to 7 in such a way as to provide him with a launching pad for his appeal on behalf of Onesimus.



But, speaking personally, I do *not* share the view of some that Paul had intended to put Philemon in a corner when he included the whole 'church' in his opening salutation:

'Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to ... *and the church in your house*'¹⁰⁰ ...

... as if he had been saying to Philemon, 'You will need to do as I ask because, otherwise, the whole church which meets in your house will learn that you rebuffed me!'¹⁰¹



Rather, I read the inclusion of '*the church*' in much the same way as I do the inclusion of Apphia and Archippus:

'... to Philemon our beloved fellow-worker, *and Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and the church in your house*'.¹⁰²

I am of the opinion that Apphia and Archippus needed to hear what Paul said because they were directly concerned in it. On the (to me, reasonable) assumption that Apphia was Philemon's wife, and that Archippus was their son, clearly they would both have been directly affected by the warm reception which Onesimus was to be given into the household.¹⁰³

As far as '*the church*' was concerned, it was essential that they 'received' Onesimus 'as a brother' into *their* fellowship as 'one of' them.¹⁰⁴

I suggest that it was for this reason that, if I can put it this way, the envelope wasn't marked 'Private and Confidential'.

That is, the apostle seeks by means of his letter to open the door for Onesimus into both:

- (i) Philemon's home at Colossae, and
- (ii) the fellowship of the church which met in his house.

Paul seeks, that is, to secure an entrance for Onesimus, not only into *the household of Philemon*, but also into that which he calls elsewhere, '*the household of faith*'.¹⁰⁵

Apart from which, I believe that Paul wants to provide the whole church with a living example of the practical outworking of some of his teachings in his main letter to them. We might think, for instance, of his words 'to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae':

- (i) 'There is *not* Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, *slave, free*; but Christ is all, and in all';¹⁰⁶
- (ii) 'If one has a complaint against another, *forgiving each other*, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive';¹⁰⁷ and

(iii) 'Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven'.¹⁰⁸

Verse 22

Nor do I think that Paul intends to twist Philemon's arm behind his back ...



... when, at the close of his letter, he expresses his hope that he will shortly be paying Philemon a visit,¹⁰⁹ as if he is saying, 'Be very careful how you respond, Philemon, because I'll be coming soon to check up on you personally'.¹¹⁰

I read no more ulterior motive into his request here than I do when I read the similar expression which he wrote to the saints at Philippi at about the same time:

'I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also'.¹¹¹

That is, I take Paul's words, 'Prepare a guest room for me', to be a genuine and bona fide request.

I agree wholeheartedly with the comments of David Garland:

'Paul's arrival in Philemon's home would be a gracious answer to prayer ... which reveals that he would regard his release from prison as divine intervention.

The plural "your prayers" reminds us that this letter is intended for the entire church. He takes for granted that his prayers for them (verse 4) will be reciprocated with their prayers for him.

This verse is, therefore, not an implied threat: "I will be coming, God willing, to see how you responded".

If Philemon only complies because Paul threatens to make some inspection tour, then the letter has failed to do its work in motivating him to respond from love'.¹¹²

SUMMARY

Paul certainly has no need to bring pressure to bear on Philemon in such oblique and indirect ways. For he has packed enough plain considerations into the main body of his letter, concerning which it was said almost exactly 300 years ago:

'Scarcely any argument is forgotten that could possibly be used ... and all are pressed with such force that, *had it been the greatest favour to himself that he was asking, he could not have used more*'.¹¹³

And, as it stands, Paul's letter has provided, not only Philemon and the Colossian church, but us also, with a veritable masterpiece of Christian courtesy and tact.¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION – THE TWO LETTERS

As we have seen, it is not difficult to detect several interesting parallels between the letters of Pliny and Paul. But, in truth, they breathe entirely different atmospheres.

Not least in this, that, in Pliny's letter, we discover only three players on the stage; (i) the recipient of the letter, Sabinianus; (ii) the misbehaving young man, and (iii), of course, the writer, Pliny himself.



However, in Paul's letter, we discover, not only three similar players on the stage: (i) the recipient of the letter, Philemon; (ii) the converted runaway, Onesimus, and (iii), of course, the writer, the apostle Paul, but we cannot miss the presence also of a fourth person (a *glorious* fourth person), who is mentioned directly no less than eleven times¹¹⁵ in twenty-five verses. And, as always, He—our Lord Jesus, of course—makes all the difference!

We know, from Pliny's own pen later, that his first letter to Sabinianus achieved its purpose:

'You have done well, in compliance with my letter, to take back into your household and favour ... the freedman who was once dear to you. This will afford you pleasure, and it certainly pleases me ... as an instance of your paying so much regard to me as either to yield to my authority or to comply with my request. I applaud your conduct, and thank you'.¹¹⁶

But we possess no information about how Philemon responded to Paul's letter.¹¹⁷

For, as far as scripture records, the story ends with Paul's parting benediction: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit'.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, it has been well noted:

'The fact that Philemon preserved this epistle and allowed it to circulate among the churches strongly suggests that he did behave as Paul had requested'.¹¹⁹

And so ...



'Welcome home, "brother" Onesimus!'

Notes

¹ His full name was Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, better known as 'Pliny the Younger'. The inclusion of the epithet, 'the Younger', distinguishes him from his uncle, 'Pliny the Elder'.

² 'Pliny the Younger wrote hundreds of letters, of which 247 survive'; source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny_the_Younger.

³ N. T. Wright, '*Colossians and Philemon*', page 172.

⁴ My full version runs:

Your freedman [that is, a former slave whom Sabinianus had freed but who was still dependent on him] *came to me and begged for my pardon, as earnestly as he would have done from you. He earnestly requested me with many tears ... to intercede for him.*

I am persuaded he is a changed character, because he really does feel that he did wrong. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason; but ... you once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again; meanwhile, let me prevail with you to pardon him ... a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness.

I am nervous that, by joining my appeal with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. But I'm going to do it anyway ... Farewell.

This version combines extracts from the translations of (i) J. B. Firth, (ii) William Melmoth, revised by F. C. T. Bosanquet and (iii) N. T. Wright.

These translations can be accessed at:

(i) <http://www.attalus.org/old/pliny9.html> ... Letter 21.

(ii) https://gutenberg.org/files/2811/2811-h/2811-h.htm#link2H_4_0103 ... Letter CIII;

(iii) <http://ms.augsburgfortress.org/downloads/9780800626839Chapter1.pdf?redirected=true>.

⁵ 'The authoritative title of "Apostle" is dropped, because throughout this letter St Paul desires to entreat rather than to command (verses 8-9)', J. B. Lightfoot, '*Colossians and Philemon*', page 333.

⁶ Cf. Rom. 1. 8; 1 Cor. 1. 4; 14. 18; Phil. 1. 3.

⁷ Compare, 'We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints', Col. 1. 4. For the Greek chiasmic construction in Philemon, see D. Moo, '*The letters to the Colossians and to Philemon (Pillar)*', pages 387-389.

⁸ 'For an hour', literally.

⁹ S. McKnight, '*The Letter to Philemon (NICNT)*', page 49.

¹⁰ The primary recipient is Philemon; although plural pronouns are used in the salutation and conclusion, singular pronouns are utilized throughout the body of the letter.

'All the second-person pronouns and verbal forms in verses 4-22a and verses 23-24 are singular. This is not always clear in English translations, since modern English suffers from the handicap of not being able to distinguish second-person singular and plural forms. The body of the letter, then, focuses consistently on a single individual', D. Moo, *op. cit.*, page 362.

¹¹ Col. 4. 9 and 17 respectively.

¹² Philem. 24.

¹³ Acts 28. 30.

¹⁴ 1,500 kilometres.

¹⁵ Philem. 2; cf. Nymphas (or Nympha) at Laodicea, Col. 4. 15.

¹⁶ Philem. 22.

¹⁷ J. D. G. Dunn, 'The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon (NIGTC)', page 302.

'Rome created a "slave society". Some estimate the percentage of slaves at thirty-five percent. Rome became dependent on slavery. An estimated 250,000 slaves were sold in Rome per year ... Many, if not most, slaves who were manumitted remained dependent upon their former masters ... To illustrate the ongoing relationship of even the freed person to the master, called in Greek the paramonē-relationship, the specific example of a manumission inscription from Delphi in the first half of the first century CE provides all we need: "On the following conditions Sophrona, acting with the consent of her son Sosandros, hands over to the Pythian Apollo to be free the female house-born slave [literally, "body"] named Onasiphoron". But notice the nature and life-long length of this paramonē-arrangement:] Onasiphoron is to remain with Sophrona for the whole period of the latter's life, doing whatever she is ordered to do without giving cause for complaint. If she does not do so, then Sophrona is to have the power to punish her in whatever way she wishes to. And Onasiphoron is to give Sosandros a child', S. McKnight, *op. cit.*, pages 14-15.

In Paul's day, slavery had virtually eclipsed free labour. Slaves could be doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians, or accountants; in short, almost all jobs could be and were filled by slaves. 'It was not uncommon for a master to teach a slave his own trade, and some masters and slaves became close friends. While still not recognizing them as persons under the law, the Roman Senate in A.D. 20 granted slaves accused of crimes the right to a trial. Some slaves enjoyed very favourable and profitable service under their masters and were better off than many freemen because they were assured of care and provision. Many freemen struggled in poverty', John F MacArthur, 'Colossians and Philemon', page 104.

Once set free, however, former slaves ("freedmen") were on their own and often found it very difficult to make a living. 'A Christian slave owner who immediately released all his or her slaves might be condemning many of them to poverty and starvation. Perhaps the contemporary problem of polygamy among new converts is something of a parallel. Should a man who has converted to Christianity and come to recognize monogamy as a biblical principle immediately send all but one wife away — even if, in doing so, he condemns those women to a life as outcasts and economic hardship?' D. Moo, *op. cit.*, pages 376-377.

¹⁸ 'You owe to me even your own self', Philem. 19.

¹⁹ Acts 19. 26.

²⁰ Acts 19. 10.

²¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, page 30.

Paul was at Ephesus from A.D. 53 to 55, and he probably wrote his letter to Philemon about A.D. 62, towards the end of his imprisonment. (Note that he hopes to have his freedom soon, Philem. 22.)

²² 'Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair', Col. 4. 1.

²³ 'Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is *one of you*', Col. 4. 9.

²⁴ Epictetus, 'Discourses 3. 26. 1–2,' accessed at ...

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0237%3Atext%3Ddisc%3Abook%3D3%3Achapter%3D26.>

²⁵ S. McKnight, *op. cit.*, page 88, referencing 'New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity', volume 6, pages 55-56.

²⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, page 312.

²⁷ 'The proverb "All roads lead to Rome" derives from medieval Latin.

It was first recorded in writing in 1175 by Alain de Lille, a French theologian and poet, whose Liber Parabolarum renders it as "mille viae ducunt homines per saecula Romam" (a thousand roads lead men forever to Rome). The first documented English use of the proverb occurs more than two hundred years later, in Geoffrey Chaucer's Astrolabe of 1391, where it appears as "right as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the righte way to Rome".

The proverb's origins may relate to the Roman monument known as the Milliarium Aureum, or golden milestone, erected by Emperor Caesar Augustus in the central forum of ancient Rome. All distances in the Roman Empire were measured from this point and it was regarded as the site from which all principal roads diverged', Charles Leavitt, 'All Roads Lead to Rome: New acquisitions relating to the Eternal City', accessed at ... <https://italianstudies.nd.edu/news-events/news/all-roads-lead-to-rome-new-acquisitions-relating-to-the-eternal-city/>.

²⁸ Philem. 15.

²⁹ 'My child, whom I have begotten in my bonds', Philem. 10.

It is possible, of course, that their paths just happened to cross. But it is also possible that Onesimus began to have doubts about his decision to run away from his master, and, having either heard of Paul or met him on some occasion, he sought out Paul to enlist his help.

Might it have been an accidental encounter with his fellow-townsmen Epaphras (Col. 4. 9, 12; Philem. 23) which led to his being taken by him to see Paul?

³⁰ Philem. 11. 'Paul, having named Onesimus, now plays on the meaning of his name ['Useful'], using a synonym and an antonym from another root', F. F. Bruce, *'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians (NICNT)'*, page 213.

'The name Onesimus means "useful, profitable" and was a common slave name in Asia Minor', Michael M. Bird, *'Colossians and Philemon (New Covenant Commentary)'*, page 139.

³¹ Philem. 13.

³² William Henriksen, *'Colossians and Philemon'*, page 27.

³³ 'My own heart', Philem. 12; cf. 'a beloved brother', Philem. 16.

³⁴ Philem. 13.

³⁵ 'It was contrary to Roman law to harbour a runaway slave.

'Roman law prohibited the harbouring of runaway slaves. Slave vendors were required to reveal a slave's history of flight', M. J. Smith, *'Onesimus, Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon'*, page 55.

'A man who conceals a runaway is a thief', *'The Digest of Justinian'*, Book 11, 4: Runaway Slaves. 'Such a person has twenty days to return the runaway', S. McKnight, *op. cit.*, page 90.

³⁶ 'I would have wished to keep him with me ... but I preferred to do nothing without your consent', Philem. 13-14.

³⁷ 'This is perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a while, that you might have him forever ... more than a slave, as a beloved brother', Philem. 15.

³⁸ 'I am sending him ... back to you', Philem. 12.

³⁹ Col. 4. 7-9.

⁴⁰ This letter is in the form of an ancient letter of commendation. Compare (i) the later action of the saints at Ephesus on behalf of Apollos: 'when he was minded to pass over into Achaia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him', Acts 18. 27 ('the first instance of letters of commendation sent from one church to another', J. R. Lumby, *op. cit.*, page 329); and (ii) the example set by Paul himself in Rom. 16. 1 and Col. 4. 10.

⁴¹ Philem. 16; cf. Col. 4. 9.

⁴² Philem. 17.

⁴³ Jeremiah Smith, *'An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon'*, in Matthew Henry's 'Commentary on the Whole Bible', on Philem. 1.

⁴⁴ 'The prayer Paul records in verses 4-7 will be the basis for the appeal of verses 8-20', N. T. Wright, *'Colossians and Philemon (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)'*, page 179.

⁴⁵ Philem. 5.

⁴⁶ Col. 3. 22-25.

⁴⁷ Philem. 10.

⁴⁸ Consider the two suggested paraphrases of Philem. 6:

(i) 'Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ', D. Moo, *op. cit.*, page 394. Cf. Phil. 1. 5.

(ii) 'First, one needs to do the right thing (in this case allow trust in Christ to work itself out in generosity) and then that will produce its effects, one of which will be new insights into all the good things we have from Christ', Peter H. Davids, *'Cornerstone Biblical Commentary'*, on Philem. 6. Cf. Col. 1. 9.

- ⁴⁹ 'I pray that the practical expression of your *fellowship* ('κοινωνία') which springs from your faith may result in the deepening of your understanding of every good thing which is ours in Christ', Philem. 6; 'If then you consider me your *partner* ('κοινωνόν'), receive him as you would receive me', Philem. 17.
- ⁵⁰ 'The hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother', Philem. 7.
- ⁵¹ Philem. 20.
- ⁵² Philem. 16.
- ⁵³ 'There is no good textual reason to substitute presbeutēs, "ambassador", for presbytēs, "old man" ... M. Barth and H. Blanke, 'The Letter to Philemon', pages 321–24, try to argue the two terms are near synonyms, but in the end they choose the translation "ambassador" because they think the alternative would suggest Paul is resorting to emotional extortion. In short, they fail to realize how the rhetorical conventions in such a situation work. See now the definitive refutation of J. B. Lightfoot's conjecture in J. N. Birdsall, "Presbytēs in Philemon 9: A Study in Conjectural Emendation," NTS 39, pages 625–30. He shows not only that we have no examples of such a transcription error but also that there is no likelihood of a mishearing of the one word for the other in the New Testament era', Ben Witherington III, 'The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles', on verse 8.
- ⁵⁴ Philem. 8.
- ⁵⁵ Philem. 1.
- ⁵⁶ Eph. 6. 20; Phil. 1. 7, 13-16; Col. 4. 3; 18; 2 Tim. 2. 9; Philem. 10, 13.
- ⁵⁷ Philem. 13.
- ⁵⁸ Philem. 1, 8.
- ⁵⁹ Col. 4. 18.
- ⁶⁰ Philem. 8. "Command" is a very strong term used of a superior's authority over an inferior. Paul could act like a general and pull rank on Philemon', Ben Witherington III, *ibid.*, on verse 8.
- ⁶¹ Philem. 14 ('κατὰ ἀνάγκην').
- ⁶² See 1 Cor. 12. 31; 13. 1-8.
- ⁶³ Philem. 9.
- ⁶⁴ See Philem. 5 and 7.
- ⁶⁵ Martin Luther, 'Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon', 'The Works of Martin Luther', Volume 6, page 368; accessed at https://media.sabda.org/alkitab-8/LIBRARY/LUT_WRK6.PDF.
- ⁶⁶ Note 4 above.
- ⁶⁷ Note 4 above.
- ⁶⁸ Philem. 10.
- ⁶⁹ Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus (verses 1-2); Onesimus (verse 10); Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke (verses 23-24).
- ⁷⁰ 'Who formerly was useless to you', Philem. 11.
- ⁷¹ 'My child, whom I have fathered in my bonds', Philem. 10. 'St Chrysostom remarks on the Apostle's withholding the name, until he has favourably disposed Philemon both to the request and to the object of it', J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, page 337. For the language used, compare 1 Cor. 4. 15. Paul was not, of course, concealing anything from Philemon or the others who were listening to the letter; Onesimus was there among them as the letter was being read! Col. 4. 9.
- ⁷² Note 4 above.
- ⁷³ Philem. 12.
- ⁷⁴ Philem. 13-14.
- ⁷⁵ Philem. 8-9.

⁷⁶ Philem. 13-14.

⁷⁷ F. F. Bruce, *op. cit.*, pages 214-215.

⁷⁸ 'The details behind the separation are not stated, perhaps to avoid embarrassing Onesimus further and to refrain from reminding Philemon of his loss', Michael M. Bird, *op. cit.*, page 140.

⁷⁹ Philem. 15. Note the 'for' at the beginning and see the comment of A. Lukyn Williams: 'γὰρ states another reason for St Paul not retaining Onesimus', A. L. Williams, *Colossians and Philemon (The Cambridge Greek New Testament)*'.

⁸⁰ I note in passing that the apostle tactfully doesn't refer to Onesimus as having run away, but merely to him being 'separated' ('parted') from Philemon. "He does not say", writes Chrysostom, "For this cause he fled", but 'For this cause he was parted': for he would appease Philemon by a more euphemistic phrase. And again, he does not say 'he parted himself', but 'he was parted': since the design was not Onesimus' own to depart for this or that reason: just as Joseph also, when excusing his brethren, says (Gen. 45. 5), 'God did send me hither'", J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, page 340.

⁸¹ 'By receiving Onesimus back as a beloved brother, he is completing God's designs', F. F. Church, *Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon*, Harvard Theological Review, Volume 71, page 28.

I note that even Paul will claim no insight into the divine purpose, where that has not been revealed to him. Cf. 'who knows whether ...?' Esther 4. 14.

⁸² Philem. 16.

⁸³ A. Naismith, *Doctrine and the Personal Life*, in 'The Faith', edited by F. A. Tatford, page 316.

⁸⁴ Philem. 10, 19b.

⁸⁵ Philem. 7, 16, 20.

⁸⁶ 'As a beloved brother', Philem. 16.

'Note that Paul does not deny that Onesimus is still a slave. He does not say, "not now a servant", but "not now as a servant". He is still a slave; but ... the old relationship of master and slave is absorbed into the new one of brethren', H. M. Carson, *Colossians and Philemon (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)*, page 110.

⁸⁷ Note 4 above.

⁸⁸ 'The word "partner" was often used in first-century Hellenistic papyri in the sense of "business partner"', David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary)*, page 572. Cf. the same word translated 'partner' in Luke 5. 10 ('James and John ... were partners with Simon').

⁸⁹ Philem. 17.

⁹⁰ Philem. 10, 12, 16.

⁹¹ Philem. 13. Onesimus would probably have aided Paul with his personal, day-to-day needs.

⁹² Philem. 18.

⁹³ In one sense by telling him he's not going to remind him!

⁹⁴ Philem. 19.

⁹⁵ Mr Darby's rendering in his 'New Translation'. So too 'Young's Literal Translation'.

Mr Vine explains, 'ὀφίτημι, "to benefit, profit," in the middle voice, "to have profit, derive benefit," is translated "let me have joy" in Philem. 20 ... the apostle is doubtless continuing his credit and debit metaphors and using the verb in the sense of "profit"', W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', article Joy, B. Verbs, 4.

⁹⁶ 'The word translated ["profit"] is somewhat similar to the name "Onesimus", and a number of interpreters suggest therefore that Paul might intend another play on words: "You, Philemon, will truly be 'Onesimus' ['profitable'] to me"', D. Moo, *op. cit.*, page 432.

⁹⁷ Philem. 7.

⁹⁸ Philem. 17. 'Nothing so shames us into giving, as to bring forward the kindnesses bestowed on others, and particularly when a man is more entitled to respect than they. And he has not said, "If you do it to others, much more to me"; but he has insinuated the same thing, though he has contrived to do it in another and a more gracious manner', John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philemon*, Homily II.

⁹⁹ I note that, whereas Paul uses the plural, 'brothers', very frequently in his letters to address believers, he uses the singular form, 'brother', to address a fellow-believer only in verses 7 and 17 of this letter. He never even uses the word 'brother' when addressing either Timothy or Titus in his letters to them.

¹⁰⁰ Philem. 1-2.

¹⁰¹ See, for example:

(i) 'By making the issue of Onesimus a public one, Paul increases the pressure on Philemon to respond as he wishes', D Moo, *op. cit.*, page 383;

(ii) 'This was a not altogether subtle way of bringing pressure on Philemon', J. D. G. Dunn, *op. cit.*, page 313;

(iii) 'Philemon will be unable to keep this a private matter involving just himself or himself and his immediate family. The eyes of his church will be on him, watching how he responds to Paul's appeal', Ben Witherington III, *op. cit.*, on verses 1-3.

¹⁰² Philem. 2.

¹⁰³ 'If Onesimus had been a household slave, Philemon's wife would have had much to do with him and therefore would have as much interest in the Onesimus affair', J. D. G. Dunn, *op. cit.* page 312. If she was his wife, her role as 'materfamilias' would include special responsibilities in managing slaves, like Onesimus.

¹⁰⁴ Note Paul's description of Onesimus in his letter to the saints at Colossae: 'our faithful and beloved brother, *who is one of you*', Col. 4. 9. Given that 'the church' met in Philemon's house, they would doubtless have known of Onesimus's earlier reprehensible behaviour.

¹⁰⁵ Gal. 6. 10.

¹⁰⁶ Col. 3. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Col. 3. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Col. 4. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Philem. 22.

¹¹⁰ See, for example:

(i) 'While Philemon was expecting [the apostle] to come to him, he would the more do what he had requested', St. Jerome, quoted by S. J. Eales in '*The Pulpit Commentary: The Epistle to Philemon*', page 4.

(ii) 'It is likely that this is more than a casual request related to Paul's needs ... Rather, it functions as a subtle encouragement to Philemon to respond as Paul hopes he will: Paul will be coming soon to see personally just what has happened with Onesimus', D. Moo, *op. cit.*, page 437.

(iii) 'This final word of the Apostle's was intended also to supply Philemon with a final motive for receiving Onesimus back again. The prospect of meeting would enhance the force of the Apostle's wish. Did Philemon decline to grant his friend's request, or did he grant it only partially and grudgingly, how could he look Paul in the face when the liberated prisoner returned to Colossae?', W. Graham Scroggie, '*A Note to a Friend (Paul to Philemon)*', page 131.

Separately, if, in the event, Paul was able later to visit Philemon (along with, for the first time, the church at Colossae, Col. 2. 1), he would then have been able to say of Philemon what he had once said concerning Gaius of Corinth: 'who is host to me and to the whole church', Rom. 16. 23.

¹¹¹ Phil. 2. 24.

¹¹² D. E. Garland, '*The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*', page 341.

¹¹³ Jeremiah Smith, *op. cit.*, introductory comments. Accessed at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Phm.i.html>.

For brief biographical facts, see [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography_1885-1900/Smith,_Jeremiah_\(d.1723\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography_1885-1900/Smith,_Jeremiah_(d.1723)), and, for information about the compilation of the later parts of the commentary, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Henry#Literary_work.

¹¹⁴ 'What we see in this document is the limits to which Paul was prepared to go rhetorically to achieve an important aim. While of course he was not prepared to resort to dishonesty or trickery, nor would he conjure up feigned emotions, he was prepared to use all the normal rhetorical conventions, pulling out all the stops, including combining references to persuasion and command and playing the emotion card repeatedly, to give a discourse the necessary weight to achieve its goal. If this makes us uncomfortable because it seems manipulative by modern standards, it is because we do not live in the kind of social and rhetorical environment Paul did, where this kind of discourse was not only commonplace but actually relished and applauded, and where power inequities in relationships and social iniquities such as slavery presented the orator with situations requiring very strident and bold rhetoric to accomplish some purposes', Ben Witherington III, *op. cit.*, on verses 21-22.

¹¹⁵ Philem. 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 16, 20 (2), 23, 25

¹¹⁶ '*The second letter of Pliny the Younger to Sabinianus*'. The version in the main text combines extracts from the translations of (i) J. B. Firth and (ii) William Melmoth, revised by F. C. T. Bosanquet. These translations can be accessed at:

(i) <http://www.attalus.org/old/pliny9.html> ... Letter 24;

(ii) https://gutenberg.org/files/2811/2811-h/2811-h.htm#link2H_4_0103 ... letter CV.

¹¹⁷ Any more than we are told how, for instance, (i) Jonah responded to the Lord's lecture in Jonah 4. 9-10, (ii) how the lawyer responded to Jesus' command in Luke 10. 37 or (iii) how the elder brother responded to the father's implied entreaty at the close of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. 31-32.

¹¹⁸ Philem. 25.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Constable, '*Expository Notes*', on Philem. 25.