The Epistle to Philemon

A Cautious Approach

Philemon 1-7

Introduction:

Onesimus, a thieving, runaway slave, had fled to Rome where he met Paul and Paul through Paul met the Lord. Paul is sending Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon, whom he knows from his ministry in Asia Minor. In the process he is going to tell Philemon that he, Paul, would like to have Onesimus stay and serve him in prison, but he won’t keep him there without Philemon’s permission. This brings all sorts of questions to our minds.

* Why is he sending him back?
* Is Paul – and the Bible for that matter- in favor of slavery?
* Why doesn’t he tell Philemon to set him free?

Paul does ask Philemon to take him back not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. In so doing, the apostle gave not only some insight into the institution of slavery in the Apostolic Age but also his Christian response to it. BKC (Edwin Deibler)

With this background in mind, we will study this epistle.

A Cautious Approach

I. Greetings – 1-2

A. Where They Were From - 1a-1b

1. Paul’s condition – 1a

“Paul, a ﻿﻿prisoner of Christ Jesus,”

Notice: He is not a prisoner of Rome or the Jews.

2. Paul’s Companions – 1b

“and Timothy *our* brother,”

B. Whom They Were For – 1c – 2

1. How He Claims Them –

“To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, Archippus our fellow soldier”

Our ἡμῶν – plural

It could refer only to Paul –

Royal pronoun or Editorial pronoun

More likely, includes Timothy. They are not only a fellow laborer and a fellow soldier – They are Paul’s and Timothy’s fellow laborer and soldier. He claims them as his very own. There is nothing like expressed appreciation of fellow workers.

2. How He Commends Them –

a. Philemon the Saint –

“To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer,”

He was also a friend.

b. Apphia the Sister

Apphia was probably Philemon’s wife. Paul calls her – not a sister- but the sister. She is special to Paul, to Philemon, and to the church.

“and to the church in your house” - The church apparently met in the house of Philemon. That would indicate that he was wealthy, also the fact that he owned slaves.

c. Archippus the Soldier –

We should not think of him as a Roman Soldier, but as a Christian soldier, a fellow soldier with Paul.

II. Grace and Peace – 3

A. Grace

Paul directs Philemon’s thoughts toward:

1. The Father of the Christian Family

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father”

We know that grace is not only unmerited favor, but, favor in spite of demerit. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

2. The Focus of the Christian Faith and the Lord Jesus Christ

“and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

a. The Lord – Power

“Lord” emphasizes His Deity. He is able to do, “exceedingly abundantly ﻿﻿ above all that we ask or think,

b. Jesus – Person

This is his human name. He is a Man. He is one of us and one with us. Therefore He could (and did) die for us and as us.

c. Christ – Position

We should not confuse His Deity and His Messianic name. His works do not prove His deity, but prove His Messiahship (Math.11:2-6)

B. Peace –

1. Peace with God – Romans 5:1

“Therefore, ﻿﻿having been justified by faith, ﻿﻿we have ﻿﻿peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,”

Everyone who believes in Jesus is justified and has “Peace with God” It is a position which cannot change. So Paul is not talking about that kind of positional peace. Rather, he is referring to the peace of God.

2. Peace of God – Philippians 4:﻿6﻿ ﻿-7

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with ﻿﻿thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and ﻿﻿(as a result of that) the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard {garrison} your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

III. Gratitude – 4-6

A. When Paul Prayed for Philemon – 4

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﻿﻿“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,”

Paul had quite a prayer ministry in prison. This is one of the many advantages of his being in prison. He had time for the things that mattered.

B. Why Paul Prayed for Philemon – 5-6

1. Philemon’s love for the saints – 5a

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“hearing of your love … toward all the saints”

Paul knew these things because of the reports of Epaphras and probably Onesimus. “all the saints” would include the slaves, if they were believers - and Onesimus is one now.

2. Philemon’s faith in the Lord Jesus – 5b

“faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus”

It is obvious that the love he showed grew out of the faith he possessed and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.

The coupling of faith in Christ and love for the saints was also true of the Ephesians the Colossians, the Thessalonians; all in the first few verses of each epistle.

C. What Paul Prayed – 6

“that the sharing of your faith may become effective ﻿﻿by the acknowledgment of ﻿﻿every good thing which is in ﻿﻿you in Christ Jesus.”

How does your witnessing become effective? - It seems that it comes by the second part of the verse. When we understand everything that we have in Christ, the sharing of our faith becomes more effective. Apart from that our witness has a hollow sound.

IV. Gladness - 7

A. The Personal Experience of Philemon’s Love

“For we ﻿﻿have great ﻿﻿joy and ﻿﻿consolation in your love,”

Paul received great joy from the love which Philemon expressed. He also received consolation (encouragement) by it.

B. The Practical Expression of Philemon’s Love

“because the ﻿﻿hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.”

The word “heart” is not but σπλάγχνα which refers to the inner parts of the body – the emotions. It is a deep emotional term.

The term “refreshed” is used by Jesus in Matthew 11:28

“Come to ﻿﻿Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Literally: “I will refresh you.”)

In this case, the saints had been brought to Jesus by one of His servants through a witness of His Word. They were refreshed by the experience.

Paul adds “by you, brother.” It must have touched the heart of Philemon. It certainly set the stage for the next section of the letter, “A Comprehensive Appeal” – Philemon 8-19

Conclusion: