

## An Odd Little Letter

It was a peculiar addition to our New Testament canon. It is the shortest of Paul's extant letters, although not the shortest book, either by number of verses or word count, included in the New Testament, a distinction which belongs to the Second General Epistle of John. It is not a letter addressed to a church or to a group of churches or even to a church leader but simply to a man who was wealthy enough to afford a house of enough size that the church in Colossae met there. It does not address any great theological point or give instruction on matters of faith or worship. It is not written in the manner of instruction from an apostle, the great teacher of the missionary who founded the church in Colossae, but rather as a request from an old man to a younger, a man who may hold in his heart some respect and gratitude for the old prisoner. It is, of all things, a letter of introduction, or more properly of re-introduction, commending to the recipient the one who has carried the letter from Rome who is, in fact, the runaway slave of the addressee. Such a strange little letter and yet, according to both legend and history, it has had a profound impact on the development of our faith and still, I believe, has lessons for us today.

So, let's begin by putting this odd little letter in its proper context. Although it is separated in our Bibles from the Book of Colossians by several other Pauline letters, many commentators and preachers choose, as I have done, to consider it along with that letter, even though Colossae is not directly named in Paul's letter to Philemon. We can be relatively sure, however, that the original accompanied Paul's letter to the Colossians. Just as Onesimus carried the letter concerning his own case to Philemon, so we also find mention of him in Colossians as Paul's postman. In Colossians chapter four, we read, "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here."

There are other common names in the two letters as well. At the close of the letter to Philemon, Paul includes the greetings of Epaphras, whom we know from Colossians as the founder of that church. And in the opening, Paul salutes not only Philemon but also Apphia, probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus, possibly his son, as well as the members of the church who meet in Philemon's house. Archippus also receives a special word in Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he writes, "And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'" Paul also indicates his imprisonment in both letters and names the same companions in his confinement: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. In the world of Biblical scholarship, this is as close to incontrovertible proof as you are going to get that the two letters were written and delivered at the same time.

The reason for the writing of the letter is also made relatively clear in the letter. Onesimus is a slave who has run away from Philemon's household. It may be that he stole from Philemon either in making his escape or as the event which propelled his departure. Not surprisingly, scholars have been much divided on this point as they try to explain why Paul offers to repay any debt of Onesimus in verse 18 of the letter. At the very least, Onesimus owes his owner for the labor lost during his absence and, as George B. Caird writes, "Paul knows very well that Onesimus has *wronged* his master and owes him a considerable sum of money. He must have helped himself to at least enough to pay his way to Rome." In Rome, the young man has come under Paul's tutelage. He has become a Christian and been of great help and comfort to the old

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apostle. Philemon may have thought of his slave as “useless,” even before his flight but with Paul, Onesimus has finally lived up to his name, which means “useful” or “profitable.” But under Roman law, he is still a fugitive slave, subject to any punishment devised by his master, up to and including death. Despite Paul’s own training from Deuteronomy that an escaped slave was not to be returned to his master, the apostle has apparently convinced Onesimus that the right thing to do is to return to Colossae and to throw himself on Philemon’s mercy.

Apparently, Paul has heard enough about Philemon to make him consider this an appropriate course of action. He knows that Philemon is a believer, having heard, probably from Epaphras, of his faith toward the Lord Jesus. He knows that Philemon is possessed of enough generosity of spirit to open his home to his fellow-believers in Colossae as their base. It is probably this fact which prompts him to address Philemon as “co-worker” and to praise him for refreshing the hearts of the saints. And Epaphras must also have told Paul that Philemon’s general attitude toward others lives up to his name, which means “friendly” or “affectionate.” Of course, if you want someone to behave in a loving way, it’s always a good strategy to praise them in advance for just how often they do behave in that way.

And it’s clear from Paul’s letter that it’s important to him that Philemon receive Onesimus well. He calls Onesimus “my child” and “my heart.” The designation of child is not one that Paul uses easily, though it is not unprecedented. He refers to his young colleagues Timothy and Titus in this way in the letters addressed to them as well as in his reference to Timothy in I Corinthians. In this, Paul is following the Biblical example of the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha as did many rabbis. The Babylonian Talmud says, “When a man teaches the son of another the Torah, the Scripture treats him as if he had begotten him.” Given what we believe to be the level of influence of mystery religions in Colossae, Philemon would also have been familiar with this use of the term “son” or “child” from that quarter. But when Paul writes that he is sending Philemon his heart in the form of the fugitive slave, he is clearly upping the ante.

Paul really does pull out all the stops to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus in this little letter. He praises him liberally, he tugs at his heartstrings by referring to himself not as an apostle but as a prisoner and as an old man – although he does point out he could command Philemon if he wanted to and reminds him that by accepting the Gospel which came through Paul’s teaching of Epaphras, he owes Paul his very self. Paul even congratulates him on doing as he asks, before poor Philemon has even had the chance to consider what to do. Despite what I’ve said over the last few weeks about Paul mellowing by the time of the writing of Colossians and Philemon, there’s still plenty of rhetorical power left to the old man.

We have only conjecture about how Philemon ultimately received Paul’s importunities. Some forty years after Paul wrote to Philemon, Ignatius, the widely-respected bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus in which he praised their own bishop, a man named Onesimus. In that same letter, Ignatius makes reference to Paul’s letter to Philemon. Church tradition tells us that Onesimus the bishop was Onesimus the former slave, set free by Philemon, who, by virtue of his studies with Paul and because of the characteristics that made Paul call him “useful,” had risen into the leadership of the church which had sent Epaphras into the Lycus Valley to start the church in Colossae. If this old tradition is true, it becomes much easier to understand how the little letter to Philemon became a part of our New Testament, chronicling as

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it does God's choice of yet another unlikely candidate, a useless runaway slave, to become a leader in the Beloved Community. In fact, a 1983 book on the formation of the New Testament posits that the Bishop of a major city such as Ephesus would have had a significant influence on which writings were circulated and accepted. Philemon's forgiveness of his runaway slave may have given us the New Testament as we know it.

But if indeed Philemon set Onesimus free to achieve these things as Bishop of Ephesus, why was his example not more widely adopted? How is it that whole nations of Christian people managed to continue the peculiar institution of slavery for another eighteen hundred years after Philemon was faced with the dilemma of what to do with a slave who was also a brother in Christ? Part of the answer may be found in the writings of Paul himself. Paul refers to slavery in his letters many times, most often as a metaphor for his own life or the life of any believer in Christ. We are either willing slaves of God or unwilling slaves of sin. But in addressing non-metaphorical slavery, Paul confines himself to practical advice for slaves and their masters. The following verses may ring strangely to our ears as we consider the gross injustice of one human being owned by another. From Colossians: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality." From Ephesians: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free." There is similar advice for slaves in I Corinthians, I Timothy and Titus. The apostle never critiques the practice of slavery itself. He simply accepts it as a given in his culture. Perhaps Paul believed that Jesus was returning quickly enough that a push against slavery was unnecessary. Perhaps he believed that since by proclaiming Jesus as Lord in defiance of Caesar Christians were already setting themselves against the most powerful force in the world, they had enough to worry about without trying to change slavery as well. We simply cannot know.

On the other hand, Paul was certainly introducing a new outlook on the socio-economic complex of slave-holding when he preached that there was no slave or free in Christ. Listen to the advice to masters which follow each of the passages of advice to slaves which I just read: "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven... Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality..." In reminding slave-owners that their believing slaves were their brothers in Christ, in telling them that God saw no difference between them and that they, too, should remember that they were as slaves to a loving God, Paul was calling on the masters in this equation to conform their dealings with their slaves to the model of Christ. As one of the great Biblical scholars of the last century, F. F. Bruce writes about Philemon: "What this letter does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution could only wilt and die."

Of course, it took eighteen hundred years for the wilting and the dying to come to fruition. Human hearts are hard, we move slowly toward the Beloved Community and God's patience is

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long. A thousand ages in God's sight are like an evening gone. Still there are those among our brothers and sisters in Christ who judge not by the heart, as God does, but by externals. Paul's teaching that the barriers between slave and free have been broken down has come to fruition but what of the other barriers that humankind is so quick to erect? What about barriers between genders and skin tones, between nationalities and denominations, between parties and religions? Why do human barriers of language, philosophy and sexual orientation continue to divide us when God sees only the heart, when God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, when Christ came, not to condemn the world but that the whole world through him should be saved?

What then are the lessons of the Letter to Philemon for us? How then shall we live? To begin with, there is a message of forgiveness. Just as Paul knew that he had been forgiven much by the Jesus whom he persecuted, he reminded Philemon and by extension us that we also have been forgiven much. We are called by Jesus to forgive, just as Philemon was asked to forgive the slave who had run, cheated him of the labor owed him and probably stolen from him as well. Father, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

There is also a message for our day in the field of labor relations. We no longer own other human beings outright but we must be on our guard to insure that anyone who labors in our employ or on our behalf is treated with justice and kindness. Some of my colleagues at the Church Council of Greater Seattle are currently involved in a campaign with Puget Sound Sage to bring fair treatment to the independently contracted truckers who serve the multinational corporations at the Port of Seattle. I encourage you to go to the website for Puget Sound Sage and read about the Clean Ports act. But humane treatment of laborers can be as simple as patience and a friendly smile to the harried retail clerk who doesn't get to you quite as fast as you like or a kindly tone in your exchange with a surly customer service operator on the telephone. Those minimum-wage workers are our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, and, in some instances, our children or grandchildren.

Ultimately, there is an even deeper lesson for us in Philemon. To Philemon, Onesimus had simply been an unprofitable investment, a useless slave. He was less than human. But to Paul, he was a beloved child, the apostle's own heart. If at any time, we consider another human being to be less than human, to be an object for our manipulation, use, enjoyment or contempt, we have in our hearts committed the act that Jesus said was worthy of the fires of Gehenna. In our thoughts, we have rendered one of God's children a non-entity, killed them to our regard as surely as Cain killed Abel. We cannot, if we are in the Spirit of Christ, look at another human being and see only "the Other." Dismissive labels are not allowed in the Beloved Community, not Black or Hispanic, not Muslim or Atheist, not Gay or Lesbian. We are called to encounter all women and all men as neighbor, as sister, as brother. We are called to be open to each other's needs, receiving each one who comes our way as we would receive the Lord – in love, in kindness, in humility and in patience. It is in this way, just as Paul prayed for Philemon, that the sharing of our faith may become effective when we perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. May God guide us in every way to become effective ambassadors of God's love for all the world. Amen.