

## II. The Onesimus Affair

January 20/21, 2010

Philemon 8-25

**Aim:** To recognize the responsibilities of Christian relationships embodied in *koinōnia*.

### A. Paul's Plea (Philemon 8-20)

It is not until verse 8 that Paul finally starts to deal with the central issue of his letter. He commences with the word 'therefore' (*dio*) which signals a transition from the opening elements of salutation, address, greeting, and thanksgiving to the central concern of the letter. He has been saying many pleasant and true things about Philemon, but he now wants Philemon to demonstrate further the love that he has (because of his faith in Christ). But it is not until verse 10 – 145 words into his letter of 335 words – that he first mentions Onesimus, who is the main subject of the epistle.

Although it is one of the themes of the letter to Philemon, the word 'forgiveness' does not appear in the book. Paul does not appeal to law or principle but to love (v. 9). He could do that since he knew Philemon to be a godly, spiritually mature man whose heart was right with God.

The body of Paul's epistle to Philemon is an appeal (v. 10); a plea for Philemon to receive and restore the runaway brother, Onesimus. Paul carefully and obliquely makes this plea. It is true that Onesimus the slave has run away from Philemon the master. But now Paul is 'sending him back' (v. 12). He asks Philemon three different times to receive Onesimus back – 'You therefore receive him' (v. 13); 'you might receive him forever' (v. 15); 'receive him as you would me' (v. 17). But Paul asks for more than simply receiving the runaway slave back; he is asking Philemon to restore the relationship, based on the new fact that Onesimus is now a Christian, converted by Paul (v. 10). Onesimus is 'no longer a slave but more than a slave;' he is now a 'beloved brother' (v. 16).

Thus, the theme of this short epistle, 'receive and restore the runaway brother,' is both about the grace of forgiveness and restitution, as well as the relationship of Christians with each other as brothers (and sisters) in Christ. Paul appeals to *koinōnia* ('fellowship') in verse 6. Philemon is to have a new relationship with Onesimus, not simply because Paul sent the runaway slave back, but because now Onesimus is a Christian, a 'brother' in the Lord. That fact changes everything.

Because Paul deals delicately and indirectly with his plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a verse-by-verse treatment of this main section of the letter (vv. 8-20) is not necessarily the best way to study this epistle. Therefore, a topical treatment will instead be followed. There are three central human relationships in this short epistle: Paul's relationship to Onesimus; Paul's relationship to Philemon; and Philemon's relationship to Onesimus. These relationships, of course, flow from the fundamental fact that each of these men has a relationship with Jesus Christ, and this relationship brings them into intimate fellowship as members of a spiritual family (v. 6). It is this fellowship built on faith that provides the fundamental theological grounding for Paul's appeal to Philemon. This fellowship brings great blessing; it also imposes obligations. The *koinōnia* between these three individuals forms a fitting outline to consider the body of the epistle of Philemon.

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### 1. Paul's Relationship to Onesimus (vv. 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18-19)

#### a) *Son* (v. 10)

Paul repeats the verb *parakalō* ('I appeal') that he has already used in verse 9a, the repetition being required after the parenthesis about Paul's circumstances in verse 9b.

Onesimus had been 'begotten' (*gennaō*) while Paul was in chains; Paul now saw him as a 'son' (*teknon*, 'child'). Paul prefers to use this word to depict his relationship to beloved associates, so it is no surprise that he uses it here of Onesimus. The name of Onesimus is actually withheld in Greek until the very end of the verse: "I appeal to you for my child, whom I fathered while in chains – Onesimus." It is rhetorically effective for Paul to characterize Onesimus first as his 'son,' and then describe the manner in which he became his son before actually naming him.

Paul was bonded to Onesimus. Once again Paul uses family terms. This was to remind Philemon that when anyone is saved that person enters into an entirely new relationship with Christ and with other believers. They all become brothers and sisters in Christ.

The very fact that Onesimus was standing there as Philemon read the letter proved that he had a repentant attitude. Paul appeals to his 'child' in the faith, begotten in his imprisonment, who now seeks restoration with the one he had wronged. The former fugitive is now Paul's spiritual offspring, like Timothy, Titus, and Philemon himself. His repentance shows the genuineness of his faith.

#### b) *Profitable* (v. 11)

Since his conversion, Onesimus had been of great assistance to Paul. Conversion to Christ always brings about a complete change in a person. Before he was saved, Paul himself thought that he was being a useful servant to God. But a great transformation took place in him when he met Christ on the road to Damascus. Then he came to view all of those previous achievements as 'rubbish' (Phil. 3:5-9).

Even as Christians, particularly when we are feeling downcast, we may consider ourselves to be useless to God and His people. But if we can accept the responsibility laid upon us by the call of the gospel, then we will prove to be helpful in many ways that we may not have previously considered feasible. At one time, Paul found Mark to be unworthy of continuing with him in his missionary enterprises (Acts 15:37, 39), but now Mark was one of Paul's companions (v. 24; cp. Col. 4:10). Just a few years later, near the end of his life, Paul would write that Mark was 'helpful to me in my ministry' (2 Tim. 4:11). Others, too, may look at us as believers and think that we have nothing constructive to offer to the work of the Lord. But if Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, then you are useful in the kingdom of God.

#### c) *Heart* (v. 12)

Paul takes the initiative: 'I am sending him back' (*anapempō*). This is not to say that Onesimus was not willing, or even anxious, to return. The point is that Paul chooses rather to highlight his decision on this matter. As vv. 12b-13 make clear, the focus is then on the sacrifice that Paul is making. It is this 'fellowship of love' between himself and Philemon that Paul wants to make the basis of Philemon's response.

The Old Testament gave directions for this general situation (cp. Dt. 23:15-16). Bruce has suggested that this law might have led Paul to keep Onesimus with him as long as he did. In any case, Paul's decision to send Onesimus back to Philemon is based on neither Jewish nor Roman

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law but on the higher law of love. The fellowship he enjoys with Philemon demands that Philemon be allowed to have final say in the matter of his slave Onesimus.

During his time with Paul, Onesimus had not only come to faith in Christ, he had also realized that he had a responsibility, as much as possible, to try to put right the wrongs of the past. Therefore, he knew that he must return to his master and ask for his forgiveness. His desire was to make amends for his wrongdoing and be accepted back into Philemon's household and resume his duties. Onesimus went back in humility with two things to encourage him: Paul's blessing and commendation, and the companionship of Tychicus (Col. 4:7-9).

Paul continues to speak highly of Onesimus. Onesimus had endeared himself to Paul so much that losing him would be like tearing out his 'very heart.' There was clearly now a strong bond of affection between the veteran evangelist and the young disciple. The Greek word for 'heart' is not the normal *kardia*, from which we get such words as 'cardiac,' but an entirely different word which includes the idea of the feelings and compassions. As in verse 7, 'heart' translates *splancha*, which literally means 'bowels.' Paul's feelings ran deep for this fugitive Phrygian slave. Onesimus is not only Paul's 'son in the Lord;' he has also quite quickly become a very dear friend and intimate companion.

### d) *Servant* (v. 13)

So helpful had Onesimus become to Paul that the apostle 'wished to keep' him at his side. It was no easy task for Paul to let Onesimus go. Indeed, Paul's whole point here is that he was in conflict, torn between two desires: the desire to keep Onesimus with him and the desire to let Philemon decide the matter. Even as he determined on the latter course of action, he was still 'wishing' (*eboulēmen*) that he could keep Philemon with him.

The verb translated by 'helped' is *diakoneō*, a verb that Paul sometimes uses to refer to gospel ministry (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:3). However, it seems that Onesimus' services to Paul were more personal in nature. 'Serve' originally referred to waiting on tables at a meal (Acts 6:2), and the word here probably has this more mundane sense. Had Paul intended to portray Onesimus as involved in preaching or something similar, we would have expected Paul to say that he was helping him 'in the gospel.' But by saying, rather, that Onesimus was helping Paul while he was 'in chains for the gospel,' he draws attention to his personal circumstances. It is clear from verse 13 that Onesimus had been just the help that Paul needed.

### e) *Brother* (v. 16)

In verse 16, Paul used another emotive term in describing Onesimus as 'a dear brother.' The apostle could hardly be more forceful: Onesimus was his child, his heart, his brother! From this we learn an indispensable canon for building relationships: reconciliation and its cousins – intimacy, closeness, and fellowship – thrive when believers are able to express their true feelings. If Paul had said he loved Onesimus, it would have indicated *something* of how he felt. But his choice of language left no doubt in Philemon's mind.

### f) *Guarantor* (vv. 18-19)

There is a strong hint in verse 18 that Onesimus had financed his flight to Rome by stealing something from his master. Should there still be any lingering doubts in Philemon's mind, Paul would even be willing to repay any wrong that Onesimus has done to his master. He tells Philemon to 'charge it to his account' (*ellogeō*). And the reason he is prepared to do this is because Onesimus is very dear to him.

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It is likely that no amount of honest work after his conversion would have earned enough to cover the debt, so, in a note written in his own hand, Paul offered to cover Philemon's losses himself (v. 19). Thus, Paul reinforces the truth of what he is saying, by taking the pen out of the hands of his amanuensis and in his own handwriting, he signs an IOU. Although he was in prison, Paul probably had the financial resources to pay Onesimus' debt (cp. Phil. 4:14-18).

Paul's willingness to meet Onesimus' debt to restore his relationship with Philemon is a marvelous picture of Christ's work. Philemon, like God, had been wronged. Onesimus, like the sinner, stood in need of reconciliation. Paul offered to pay the price to bring about that reconciliation. That is the same role Jesus plays in the relationship between the sinner and God.

Never are we more like God than when we forgive. Never are we more like Christ than when we pay someone else's debt so that reconciliation can take place. Paul's willingness to suffer the temporal consequences of Onesimus' sin mirrors Christ's willingness to suffer the eternal consequence of our sin. Although the Bible does not record what Philemon did, he no doubt freely forgave Onesimus and charged nothing to Paul. In light of Christ's forgiveness of him, and Paul's appeal, he could do no less.

### 2. Paul's Relationship to Philemon (vv. 8-9, 14, 17, 18-19, 20)

#### a) Appeal (vv. 8-9a)

Paul loved Philemon. Such was the bond of love between the two men that Paul did not need to command Philemon. Paul knew that he was motivated by love (vv. 4-7). Such love, being the proper fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10), compels one to do 'that which is proper.' Hence it was unnecessary for Paul to use his apostolic authority.

The adjective 'bold' translates a Greek noun, *parrēsia*. This word is formed from Greek words that mean 'full speech,' and it was used by the Greeks to refer to the rights of people in a democracy openly to express their opinion. This meaning of the word – 'openness in speech' – easily morphs into the idea of having the 'confidence' or 'boldness' to speak out.

So far in this letter, Paul has made no mention of his apostolic authority. Paul had the right, as an apostle, to assert his authority and issue a command (*epitassō*, unique usage in Paul). Even so, it is not always a wise strategy to do so. Pulling rank may exact compliance; it does not always win hearts. Now he alludes to it, but he is still not going to demand obedience – even though he has the right to do so.

'Appeal' is a good rendering here for the verb *parakaleō*. This verb often has the stronger sense of 'exhort' (on the basis of apostolic authority) in Paul, but the context of Philemon suggests the milder translation. Because of the delicacy of his 'appeal', Paul indicates that what he is going to ask will only be given 'for love's sake' – that is, on the grounds of Christian love and Christian family loyalty. And love cannot be compelled.

Paul's reason for making love rather than a command the basis for Philemon's action is, as verse 14 makes clear, that he wants Philemon to act of his own free will. But it must also be said that the nature of Paul's appeal hardly lets Philemon 'off the hook.' Indeed, by appealing to Philemon on the basis of love, Paul raises the stakes and puts even greater pressure on Philemon. Obeying a command may be onerous, but it is rather straightforward and can be accomplished grudgingly. But Paul puts the ball into Philemon's court; he is, in effect, testing the depths of Philemon's love and the extent of his understanding of Christian fellowship. He must not only

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do what Paul wants him to do; he must do it for the right reasons. And the pressure on Philemon is all the greater when we remember that this appeal is being heard by his entire house church (v. 2).

### *b) Aged Prisoner (v. 9b)*

Despite Philemon's spiritual maturity and deep love for Paul, the apostle knew it would be humanly difficult for him to forgive Onesimus. As Philemon read this letter, Onesimus was no doubt standing there in front of him. As he viewed his runaway slave, who had caused him so much trouble, he may have struggled to control his emotions. To help Philemon overcome any feelings of anger and hostility Paul includes two statements about himself. The name 'Paul' itself would have considerable force for Philemon. But Paul adds to the emotional impact of his self-reference by reminding Philemon that he is also an 'old man' and a 'prisoner.'

First, Paul describes himself as 'aged.' It is sometimes argued that this should read 'Paul the ambassador.' There is only the difference of one Greek letter between 'aged' (*presbutēs*) and 'ambassador' (*presbeutēs*), but given his stated reluctance to throw his weight about, a touching appeal to his age is more likely than an assertion of his status as a herald of the gospel. Though Paul was now about sixty – an old man in that era of shorter life spans – he may not have been much older than Philemon, who had a grown son in the ministry. But aged in relation to Paul meant more than chronological age. Paul was older than his years. In addition to the tally of years, there was also the wear and tear of a life lived at full stretch for the cause of Christ. He had packed five lifetimes into his threescore. Paul may therefore calculate that he would gain Philemon's sympathy by reminding him that he was an old man. Paul has found in Onesimus a 'son' to help him in his defenseless condition (v. 10), and so it would be natural for him to appeal to his age as a reason why he does not want to send Onesimus back to Philemon (v. 13). How could Philemon refuse the man who had been through all the sufferings listed in 2 Corinthians 11:22-33?

If that were not enough to elicit Philemon's sympathy, Paul rattles his chains again. He reminds Philemon that he not only an old man, but an imprisoned old man, and all this 'for Christ's sake.' It was because of his loyalty to Christ and his desire to suffer for Him that he had been incarcerated. Three times in this context Paul mentions his status as a prisoner (also vv. 10, 13), not only, perhaps, to stress his helpless condition but also, perhaps, as an ironical contrast to the freedom that he wishes for Onesimus. Philemon could not possibly turn down a request from a man in such honorable suffering.

### *c) Voluntary (v. 14)*

Out of politeness, Paul did not demand that he be allowed to keep Onesimus with him; he desired Philemon's consent to keep Onesimus and he also wishes Philemon to act in a spontaneous way, without any feeling of compulsion, or even suggestion, from Paul. 'Consent' (*gnōmē*) implies not just agreement to a course of action, but agreement that arises from a considered opinion about the matter. Only if Philemon has sincerely in his own mind decided on the appropriateness of what Paul is recommending will his act be truly voluntary and loving.

The central contrast in the purpose clause of the second half of v. 14 is expressed in Greek in two contrasting prepositional phrases: 'according to necessity' (*kata anankēn*) versus 'according to free will' (*kata helousion*) (cp. 1 Pe. 5:2). Onesimus and Philemon needed to meet. Paul did not want to force Philemon to do anything. He wanted him to make the choice to do good by his

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own will. More than that, Paul wanted Philemon to observe the transformation and value of Onesimus first hand.

### *d) Partner (v. 17)*

Here Paul pulls together the threads of his argument, an argument focused on relationships. Paul prefaces his appeal to Philemon with a reminder of their ‘partnership.’ ‘Partner’ is the word most English versions use to render the Greek *koinōnos* here. In setting the stage for his appeal, Paul refers to ‘the fellowship based in faith’ that he and Philemon share (v. 6). This verse should be seen as a reference back to that fundamental sharing of the reality of the new covenant experience that Paul and Philemon have in common. The ‘if’ language in this clause does not call into question the reality of this fellowship, but puts the onus on Philemon to acknowledge it.

Paul is commanding Philemon not only to ‘welcome’ (*proslambanō*) Onesimus back into his household, but far more importantly, to welcome him into ‘the household of faith’ (cp. Gal. 6:10). The focus through this verse is on the need to receive Onesimus as a Christian. Philemon is to give to his slave Onesimus the same welcome he would extend to the apostle Paul.

### *e) Indebted (v. 19)*

It was Paul’s custom to dictate his letters to an amanuensis. In many of his letters, however, he wrote a closing greeting with his own hand (cp. Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17). That is not unlike a business man dictating a letter and then signing it and adding a postscript in his own handwriting. Verses 19-25, if not the whole letter, are a handwritten note from Paul himself.

Note Paul’s promise to pay all expenses for Onesimus, coupled with the assertion that Philemon ‘owed’ him. ‘Pay it back’ (*apotinō*), like ‘charge it’ in verse 18, is a technical term drawn from the realm of commerce. Paul is promising to ‘pay any damages.’ By offering to make good Onesimus’ debt, Paul removes any pressure Philemon may have felt.

Paul’s plan is to put Onesimus’ debt on his account and then cancel it because Philemon owes Paul an even greater debt. ‘Owe’ translates a different Greek word (*prosopheilō*) than the one Paul used in verse 18. The word here has the sense of ‘owe besides’, which makes sense in this context: quite apart from all other considerations, Philemon owes Paul his very self (*seauton*); Philemon is in debt to Paul for his eternal life. Paul likely was used by God in Philemon’s conversion during a visit of the latter to Ephesus while Paul was resident there. Onesimus owes Philemon a material debt; Philemon owes Paul a spiritual debt. Onesimus owes Philemon a temporal debt; Philemon owes Paul an eternal one. Philemon is turned from creditor to debtor in the space of two verses, and loaded with a debt so large (‘your very self’) that he is under limitless obligation to Paul.

We who owe so much to so many should be quick to forgive others who owe us a debt. Having received so many unpayable spiritual riches from so many who ask nothing in return, can I not forgive a temporal debt?

### *f) Brother (v. 20)*

Paul concludes the body of the letter in verse 20 by echoing three key words in the conclusion to the opening of the letter in verse 7: ‘brother’ (*adelphē*), ‘refresh’ (*anapauō*), and heart/s (*splanchna*). Philemon, who refreshed the ‘hearts’ of God’s people (v. 7), is to refresh Paul’s ‘heart’ (v. 20) by giving a full Christian welcome to Onesimus, Paul’s very ‘heart’ (v. 12). Paul is adding no new request here; he is simply strengthening with a final personal appeal, the

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request he has made in verse 17. Onesimus is not mentioned again: the focus is entirely on the relationship between Philemon and Paul and what the ‘obligations’ of the former are within that relationship.

Paul’s humor sparkles again with another pun in verse 20, for the word translated ‘benefit’ (*onaimēn*) had the same root as ‘Onesimus’ (*Onēsimos*). He is saying, ‘Onesimus is your benefit or profit. So now, Philemon, you be my Onesimus, my benefit.’ Believers should be motivated to forgive by the knowledge that forgiveness brings joy and blessing to other believers.

While Paul would be pleased that the prodigal’s return had been met with forgiveness and acceptance as a Christian brother, he also hoped to enjoy the growth in Philemon that made such an outcome possible. Onesimus is not the only trophy of grace mentioned in this passage. His is not the only example of a changed life. We see the same power at work in Philemon, a man who was clearly committed to striving for spiritual excellence. Paul’s appeal to him was essentially this: ‘Given what you are and the kind of Christian you want to be, rise to the challenge and embrace the former disgrace as a brother.’

### 3. Philemon’s Relationship with Onesimus (vv. 10-11, 18, 15-16)

#### a) *Useless/Useful* (vv. 10-11)

One of the things that makes this short letter impressive is the testimony that it gives to the power of the gospel to change lives. Onesimus was now a very different person. After his conversion by Paul, Onesimus had become a consistent and gracious Christian. This helps to explain the pun on his name in verse 11. Onesimus means ‘useful’ or ‘profitable.’ It was typical of the kind of aspirational name that was often given to slaves. In the past, Philemon had, apparently, found his slave to be useless, but we have no details about this. Perhaps it was the fact that he had run away and had possibly stolen something belonging to his master that Paul had in mind when he said that Onesimus had been useless to Philemon.

However, the apostle then goes on to say that although he had been useless to Philemon in the past, ‘now he has become useful to both you and me.’ Paul indicates the nature of Onesimus’ transformation with a wordplay that was rather common in the ancient world: Onesimus is no longer *achrēstos*, but now is *euchrēstos* (‘useless/useful’ or ‘unprofitable/profitable’). In effect he was saying, ‘Useful formerly was useless, but now he is useful.’ At first Mr. Useful had been quite the opposite, but now he had begun to live up to his name and Paul was confident that Philemon would share his estimate of the new convert.

Paul may have intended a second wordplay in his *achrēstos/euchrēstos* contrast. For, as a glance at the transliteration of these Greek words reveals, the basic word used to form them – *chrēstos* – is quite similar to the word for ‘Christ’: *Christos*. It is possible, then, that Paul intends not only to claim that Philemon has moved from being ‘useless’ to being ‘useful,’ but that he has also moved from being without Christ (*a-Christos*) to being a ‘good Christian’ (*eu-Christos*).

#### b) *Wronged* (v. 18)

Philemon had been wronged by Onesimus’ flight. What is the nature of Onesimus’ debt to Philemon? How has he ‘wronged’ him? The ‘debt’ may both refer to Onesimus’ having robbed his master as he fled. It seems likely that Onesimus took money or possessions from Philemon to finance his flight. Or the ‘wrong’ Onesimus did may have been simply his running away and his ‘debt’ what he owed to his master in compensation for the time of his service that had been

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lost. In fact, Philemon may have had to purchase a replacement for his runaway slave, not knowing if he would ever return.

The Bible clearly teaches that restitution needs to be made in such cases (Num. 5:6-8). Onesimus could not possibly pay back all he owed Philemon. He probably had not found a job in Rome and Colossians implies he spent most of his time serving Paul.

### c) *Brother* (vv. 15-16)

#### (1) God's Providence (v. 15)

Paul recognized that Philemon's whole story was ultimately woven by God's hand. While not intending to mitigate the guilt of Onesimus, Paul suggests that God's providence was at work. The passive verb 'was separated' (*echōrithē*) is widely (and correctly) viewed as a 'divine passive': a passive verb in which God is the divine agent. The action of 'separation' has the purpose of restoring Onesimus to Philemon forever; and only by seeing God behind this separation does this purpose statement make sense. He says 'perhaps' because no man can see the secret providence of God at work. God triumphs over sin through His providential power and grace. He takes the myriad contingencies of human actions and uses them to accomplish His own purposes.

Woven into Paul's argument is the amazing providence of God in waylaying Onesimus, so that the man who departed from Philemon's home (v. 15) now returned as a Christian man and brother (v. 16). Onesimus made a free choice to leave, but God overruled in grace and three lives were changed for the better. Onesimus himself became a child of God; Paul received a helper and companion; and now Philemon, if he could bring himself to acknowledge it, had another brother in Christ. Onesimus' crime and flight were made to become, by God's grace, part of the plan for bringing Onesimus to himself – much as Joseph's being sold into Egypt by his brothers eventually brought their salvation (cp. Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). Surely Philemon would not resent such a marvelous example of the grace of God at work and harden his heart against the returning penitent!

The English 'forever' can sometimes be an overtranslation of the word *aiōnion*, which, in a temporal sense can mean simply 'for a long time.' In question here is whether Paul uses the word in an 'earthly' or in a spiritual sense. It is not Onesimus' usefulness as a slave that Paul stresses in his recitation of events in vv. 8-14, but Onesimus' new status as a Christian. It would be a bit odd to suggest that God's purpose in the separation of Philemon and Onesimus was that so the former could have permanent possession of his slave. But it makes good sense to see Paul attributing to God the circumstances that have led to Onesimus' conversion and to the prospect of his 'eternal' fellowship with Philemon.

#### (2) Beloved Brother (v. 16)

The likely meaning of the open phrase is 'no longer as primarily a slave in your view of him.' Paul is saying in effect, 'Your relationship with Onesimus will no longer be dictated by your legal relationship (master-slave), but by your spiritual relationship (brothers).'

Paul's appeal is essentially this: 'Philemon, Onesimus is not the man who wronged you. He is now a new man altogether. Please love him for what grace has made him.' Philemon must cease thinking of Onesimus as a lost investment and a nuisance, but as a 'beloved brother' (*adelphos agapēton*) in Christ. Paul tellingly refers to Onesimus here with the same language he has used

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in addressing Philemon himself: a ‘brother’ (*adelphē*, vv. 7, 20) and ‘dear friend’ (*agapētō*). As ‘children’ of Paul via conversion, both Philemon and Onesimus are ‘dear brothers’ in the same spiritual family.

Paul enjoyed a relationship with Onesimus as a partner in Christ. Philemon enjoyed that relationship as well as one in the flesh, that of master and slave. He was doubly blessed. He received Onesimus’ physical service as a slave, and his spiritual service as a fellow believer in Christ.

Onesimus was a double brother to Philemon – in the flesh and in the Lord. This is something of what Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he answered Thaddeus Stevens, who was demanding destruction of the enemy at the end of the Civil War. ‘Mr. Stevens,’ said Lincoln, ‘do I not destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?’ Reconciliation makes our enemy our friend, perhaps even our intimate.

### B. Paul’s Closing (Philemon 21-25)

#### 1. Future Plans (vv. 21-22)

##### a) *Philemon’s Obedience* (v. 21)

Paul writes that he is ‘having confidence’ (*pepoithōs peithō*) in Philemon. But Paul’s confidence is not simply in Philemon but in his ‘obedience.’ This word (*hypakoē*) strikes an odd note in a letter in which Paul has expressly declined to appeal to his apostolic authority (v. 8; cp. v. 14). Some suggest that Paul now makes explicit what, in fact, has been implicit in the letter at a number of points: that, while he wants Philemon to respond voluntarily, there is nevertheless a sense in which Philemon is also under obligation to meet Paul’s wishes.

But perhaps it is better to think of this obedience as directed not to Paul personally but to what we might call the ‘gospel imperative.’ The fellowship created by faith (v. 6) carries with it obligations. To believe in Christ is to come under His ‘law,’ the law of love. Philemon, Paul suggests, is faced with a situation which, however much he should act voluntarily and on the basis of love, really has only one course of action open to him. And, of course, this obligation is one that Paul has himself suggested to Philemon. Knowing Philemon’s godly character (vv. 4-7), Paul was confident of his response.

Some have found in Paul’s words ‘I know that you will do even more than what I say’ a call for Onesimus’ emancipation. Such an assumption is unwarranted (cp. v. 16). There are several other possibilities. Paul may be calling upon Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not grudgingly, but with open arms (cp. Luke 15:22-24). He may also be requesting Philemon to permit Onesimus to minister alongside him, as well as to perform menial service. Paul may also be urging Philemon to forgive others who have wronged him. Regardless of what Paul means here, his concern is fundamentally that, whatever Onesimus’ status, Philemon treat him truly as a brother in Christ.

##### b) *Paul’s Visit* (v. 22)

Because he knew the case against him was very weak, Paul expected to be released from this first imprisonment (cp. Phil. 2:23-24). It is clear from verse 22 that Paul expected his appeal to Caesar to be decided soon in his favor, perhaps because a date for his hearing before the imperial court had been set. If so, that would mean his being released from house arrest.

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Some years earlier, Paul had written to the Romans of his desire to go to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28). In the intervening years, however, his plans had changed. He now intended to revisit the churches to the east before heading west. He hoped to come to Colossae in due course and make his base in Philemon's home. It would be difficult for Philemon to have the apostle in his 'guest room' while knowing that he had disappointed the veteran saint in his request for Onesimus to be forgiven.

Of all Paul's appeals to Philemon, this is the least subtle. He does not threaten Philemon, as he did the Corinthians (cp. 1 Cor. 4:21). Nevertheless, there is a gentle compulsion in this mention of a personal visit to Colossae. The apostle would thus be able to see for himself that Philemon had not disappointed his expectations.

Paul's request would certainly affect Philemon's treatment of Onesimus. Philemon could hardly pray for God to bring Paul to Colossae if he had not forgiven Onesimus. Yet if he fails to pray for Paul's release, Paul might remain in prison. The apostle deftly maneuvers Philemon into a corner from which he can extricate himself only by forgiving Onesimus. That is spiritual accountability at work.

In planning to visit Philemon in Colossae, the apostle was reminding Philemon that God answers prayer. If Paul is to come to Colossae, it will be through the prayers of the Colossian Christians: the pronouns at the end of the verse are plural. These are the first plural pronouns since the opening conventional grace wish in verse 3.

### 2. Fellow Workers (vv. 23-24)

The greetings from one 'fellow prisoner' and four 'fellow workers' are all directed to Philemon to himself: the 'you' is singular. By sending greetings from five men known to him, Paul reminds Philemon of his accountability to all of them. Failing to forgive Onesimus would disappoint their high expectations of him and bring him under their discipline. These five men, who were well known to Philemon, are also mentioned in Colossians 4:10-14. Tychicus, who is mentioned in Colossians, is not mentioned here. As the bearer of the letter to Philemon and to the Colossians, he was able to deliver his own greetings.

There are two other significant differences in this list with that in Colossians 4. First, is the shift in the designation 'fellow prisoner' from Aristarchus to Epaphras. Paul uses a word here that means, literally, 'fellow prisoner of war' (*synaichmalōtos*). There are two possible explanations why the word is applied to Aristarchus in Colossians and to Epaphras here. First, an interval may have come between the writing of Colossians and of Philemon, during which Aristarchus has ceased to be a prisoner and Epaphras had become one. This switch is not unlikely if, as many suppose, these fellow workers of Paul decided voluntarily to share his imprisonment in order to help him. Second, it is also possible that calling someone a 'fellow prisoner' does not mean that they are a prisoner at the time of writing but that they had, at some time, shared prison with Paul.

The second difference is the absence of 'Jesus called Justus' from the Philemon list. Perhaps he left Paul between the writing of Colossians and Philemon, or perhaps he was unknown to Philemon. He may have been a native of Rome and never had met Philemon.

Epaphras had been converted by Paul, likely in Ephesus. He was most likely the founder of the churches at Colossae (Col. 1:7-8) and its neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. He was a native of Colossae (Col. 4:12), and hence well known to Philemon. He was probably the pastor

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of the church that met in Philemon's house. Paul describes him as 'my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.' It is not known whether he, too, was a prisoner, or whether he simply identified closely with Paul in the apostle's imprisonment.

Mark (John Mark) was the son of a woman in whose house the Christians in Jerusalem met for a time (Acts 12:12). He was also the cousin of Barnabas who had abandoned Paul. His defection during the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13) led to a falling out between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-39). Perhaps Philemon knew the story and Paul was hinting about the fact that he eventually took Mark back and found him to be a valuable companion (2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:10). Peter also valued Mark's company (1 Pe. 5:13). Mark wrote the gospel that bears his name.

Aristarchus was a valued companion of Paul. He was a Jewish believer (Col. 4:11), a native of Thessalonica (Acts 20:4; 27:2). He had a long association with Paul, and had been through some rough times with him. He was with Paul during the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and on the ill-fated sea voyage to Rome that ended in shipwreck (Acts 27:4). He was Paul's beloved fellow-worker, and was with him in his imprisonment (Col. 4:10). According to tradition, he was martyred in Rome during the persecutions under Nero.

Although Demas was also one of Paul's companions (Col. 4:14), he eventually went in the opposite direction to Mark. 'Demas has deserted me' (2 Tim. 4:10). At this time, however, he was still Paul's fellow-worker.

Finally, he mentions Luke, the 'beloved physician' (Col 4:14), the author of the gospel that bears his name plus the book of Acts. He was a frequent traveling companion of Paul (Acts 16:8-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18), and no doubt he helped care for the apostle's frequent ailments. He accompanied Paul on the 'shipwreck' voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:16). So it would be natural to believe that Luke stayed on with Paul in Rome during his imprisonment there. He was a faithful and loyal friend to Paul, and he alone was with him in his final days (2 Tim. 4:11).

### 3. Grace Benediction (v. 25)

A 'grace benediction' is found in all of Paul's letter closings. The word 'grace' (*charis*) forms an inclusion here with the other mention of grace in the letter opening (v. 3). Paul extends this grace to Philemon's whole hose church: the 'your' in 'your spirit' is plural.

### 4. Postscript

We don't know the outcome of Paul's appeal to Philemon, but it is hard to image any other ending than a handsome response on Philemon's part and a full pardon for Onesimus. Surely forgiveness flowed! There was undoubtedly repeated embracing and kissing, Onesimus' repeated confessions, and Philemon's constant response, 'That is enough, my dear brother!' As the church watched, there was constant praising of God. It is extremely unlikely that the book would have found its way into the New Testament canon if Philemon had not forgiven Onesimus. If Philemon had not forgiven Onesimus, including the book in the canon would have left a false impression for all history.

Was this the end of the story? Surely not. Onesimus and Philemon went on to lead even more productive lives for Christ. Paul was released from prison, as he anticipated (cp. v. 22), and traveled extensively. One of his trips was no doubt to Colossae, where he saw for himself how Philemon had treated Onesimus.

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Many believe that Onesimus spent further time with Paul, developing into a great man of God. The historical evidence is most suggestive of this. Fifty years later when Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, was being transported from Antioch to Rome to be executed, he wrote letters to certain churches. While in Smyrna he wrote to the church of Ephesus, praising their Bishop Onesimus, even making the *same* Pauline pun on his name! ‘I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop [pastor] in this world, a man whose love is beyond words.’ It appears likely that Onesimus, the runaway slave, had become, with the passing of years, the great Bishop of Ephesus. This is one of the great stories of the gospel and of the Church – a jewel in her crown.

Nursing grudges, cherishing slights, and keeping old hatreds warm is no way of life for someone who knows that his own acceptance with God was only made possible because of the blood shed for him at Calvary (cp. Eph. 4:31-32).

For next time: Read Colossians 1:1-8.