

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY

Why, with so many churches needing pastoral care, would Paul bother to write one letter to a slave owner about his runaway slave now returning to his master? And why would the Holy Spirit include such a letter in the Bible with all the other weighty theological issues He might have dealt with? Because the issue it deals with is of such huge importance for the whole human race.

Philemon, the main recipient of the letter, was an old friend of Paul's from Colossae. His home was a church, one of the many home fellowships of those days. Philemon and Paul had worked together in Christ's work. Paul regards Philemon as an equal not a subordinate so it is as a brother that he appeals to him. Another member of his home church, Archippus, had received a personal reminder from Paul in his letter to the Colossians to fulfil his ministry.(Col.4:17) He may have shared his God-given calling with Paul at some time, but not yet got around to acting on it – like many of our hopes and dreams. Timothy, whom Paul had so often encouraged for the same reason, is included in the writing of the letter. Whether he contributes any words we do not know. It always helps however experienced we are in ministry to have a close friend who will read or listen to what we say and give honest feedback.(v.1,2)

Paul begins as usual with his greeting, "Grace and peace from God...". With Paul this is never just a polite introduction but sums up exactly of what he wants to remind Philemon. What Paul is hoping Philemon will do in response to his letter is to draw on Christ's grace and so enjoy God's peace in relation to his slave.(v.3)

As in many other letters, he begins with his prayer for the recipient of the letter. The keynote of Paul's prayers is always thanksgiving first. Our discussions with people normally begin with asking and then hopefully end with thanks. In our relationship with God we can begin with confidence that He has already given us everything we will ever need in Christ, and therefore our starting point in prayer is thanks. Philemon's faith in Christ shows in his love for Jesus first and then for all the saints. What Paul knows is that one more name should now be added to Philemon's list of saints, his slave Onesimus! There are hints in this letter that in the past Onesimus had been anything but a saint. Paul now has a request that Philemon will draw even deeper on God's grace when he hears the news of what has happened to his slave. Paul has wonderful memories of just how generous Philemon's love for others has been and how much the lives of the needy have been affected. If we are already enjoying the grace of God when we meet a new, unexpected challenge it will be a simple matter to let grace and love flow on into the latest crisis.(v.4-7)

Having prepared the ground carefully Paul is now ready to come to the heart of his reason for writing. He knows that his seniority could be used to command Philemon to accept Onesimus back without punishment for running away – which under Roman law could have meant the death penalty. Instead he appeals on the basis of the love of God which he had previously seen so amply in Philemon. He does not miss the opportunity to extract a little sympathy by reminding Philemon that he is a prisoner, not of the Emperor, but of Jesus Christ.(v.8,9)

Imagine the look on Paul and Onesimus' faces when they met again in a Roman jail! We have no idea why Onesimus was there. The city of Rome with over a million people was a magnet for runaway slaves. It was a place where they could hope to hide in the crowd. It would have offered opportunity for low paid work or petty crime. It may have been the latter which resulted in that moment when Paul and Onesimus caught each other's eyes. What a surprise – but not to God – who has a wonderful way of organising what we call coincidence. How would each react? Onesimus' response may have been of fear because his cover was blown. Paul's would be of surprised delight when we recognise a familiar face in an unlikely place. Then we ask the question – what are you doing here? Somehow Onesimus got to share his story, wondering how his master's friend would respond. Would he report him?

Paul's one concern as always was for the salvation of the person in front of him, the forgiveness of his sin regardless of what offences he had committed. Onesimus responded

with repentance and faith and so became a child of God, a new brother in Christ, for the moment a spiritual son to Paul. Now what? Onesimus' first priority was to serve his spiritual father, Paul, as he would know well how to do as a former slave.(v.10,11)

Soon Paul, in discipling Onesimus, came to the question of whether he had any responsibility or opportunity as a forgiven sinner to put right the wrongs of the past. There were two obvious answers. Firstly as a runaway slave the only way he could correct the past was to return to Philemon and put himself at his mercy. With Paul's encouragement he determined to do this. To help him Paul writes this letter to Philemon pleading for his forgiveness and reconciliation rather than punishment. One fascinating question which Paul touches on is the future relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Would they go back to being master and slave or would they now be brothers in Christ? Paul leaves them with God to sort this out.(v.12-16)

Secondly when he fled Philemon's home, Onesimus may well have taken some of his master's valuable possessions with him to sell to help his survival in the outside world. Fixing this wrong would have been more difficult for a slave/prisoner who would probably have nothing left now except what he stood up in. Would he have forever to be in debt to Philemon? Paul says 'charge it to my account'! Did he have an account with Philemon? Almost certainly not. They were old friends and brothers in Christ. Gently Paul reminds his friend how much he owes Paul for his salvation, a debt which Paul never expected to be paid. We can assume that Philemon forgave Onesimus and they were reconciled. This story illustrates beautifully how our sin against one another is dealt with. On the one hand we are forgiven totally by God but for fellowship to be restored we also need to forgive each other so that no debt of anger or guilt remains to spoil our future fellowship. If we are the offender we need seriously to ask God, is there anything I can do to put the wrong I did right. Some of the most powerful words in the English language, on which we sometimes almost choke in the struggle to say them, are the words, 'I am sorry, please forgive me.' They can be life changing.(v.17-20)

Paul has such confidence in Jesus Christ in Philemon that he is sure not only will Philemon accept Onesimus back but that he will go far beyond what Paul is asking of him. Paul cannot wait for the opportunity to come and see for himself, to meet them both again and to enjoy Philemon's gracious hospitality. Whether Paul made it or how long it took him we have no idea. If it did not happen on earth he would have to wait for the three of them to meet again in heaven. According to II Tim.4:16 Paul had two trials before the Emperor. He may have been released in between and had opportunity to fulfil his final plans including this one before his violent death.(v.21,22)

As usual as Paul is writing there are a number of friends around him wanting him to squeeze their greeting into his final words. Such greetings give a sense of the depth of love and friendship between the Christians of those days. The list of names is almost the same as in Colossians 4, suggesting that the two letters were sent at the same time. Epaphras would be special to Philemon as the Colossian who first brought the Christian gospel to Colossae.(Col.1:7; 4:12) Mark was an interesting reminder that those who fail in Christian service can be forgiven and learn to be useful.(Acts 13:13; 15:36-39; II Tim.4:11) Aristarchus had shared many of Paul's toughest times in missionary work.(Acts 19:29) Demas is a sad warning that even fellow workers can be drawn away from serving the Lord.(II Tim.4:10) Luke, the doctor and the writer of his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, stuck with Paul through thick and thin.(Col.4:14; II Tim.4:11)

The letter ends where it began with a reminder of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul had no other answer to human failing and the rifts it creates between us than the grace of Jesus. Let's explore grace!(v.23-25)

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Summarise in your own words the story of Philemon, Onesimus and Paul. What modern day circumstances have you encountered that are similar? How generally do

others react when they see such situations? Why mostly do our usual approaches not work?

2. What steps did Paul take to help them both? Why was each of these steps vital to the final outcome?
3. What prompts did Paul use to lead them both in this direction? Why is it not dishonest to employ such tactics? How can we do the same?
4. How might the future relationship between Philemon and Onesimus have looked different to those who visited their home and their home church after Onesimus' return? Why are such miraculous changes in our relationships so powerful in the work of proclaiming Jesus to the world?
5. With whom might you share the message of this letter?