

Philemon

Let us move to Philemon. This book is fascinating, and we need to think a good bit about what is actually transpiring here. According to my outline of the letters, Philemon was probably written from Rome at the end of Paul's ministry to a certain Philemon, a dear friend and fellow worker, as Paul says in the beginning. The entire short letter is a letter of appeal on behalf of the slave, Onesimus, who belonged to Philemon and ran away; in this we need to work our way toward the entire issue of slavery. Obviously the issue of slavery is addressed here, but more than that, this letter addresses the issue of how Paul conducts himself with such a socially and emotionally challenging issue. What is happening here? Let us work our way toward that.

The flow of thought of the book of Philemon is very simple. If you look at your NIV Bible, for instance, you will see that there is a positive note of connection with Philemon followed by a plea, an appeal to Philemon to deal with Onesimus in a certain way. Verse 8 is the important transition with the big word "therefore," and then verse 17 transitions with a condition clause, "So, if you consider me a partner, do this." We see that there is a flow of thought, but we need not go into the details.

Let me say a few words about the addressees and then some words about Paul's approach. Who is addressed here? There are three recipients addressed in the letter to Philemon: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. However, it is quite clear that Philemon is the addressee who is singled out. If you read in verses 2 and 4 you will notice that, while there is a broader address in the beginning, there is a narrowed appeal to Philemon. Colossians 4:9 places Onesimus in Colosse, and Colossians 4:17 mentions Archippus as a resident of Colosse. So Peter O'Brien, in his commentary on Philemon, says it can be assumed that Philemon, from whose house the slave Onesimus fled, also lived there. Thus, it is quite likely that Archippus, Onesimus, and Philemon all resided in Colosse, a city to which Paul has written a separate letter. We will look at the Colossian letter separately.

What is the issue at hand here? The issue is very tender, very fine. How does Paul deal with that issue? How does he approach it? I do not believe that this is an ironic letter, as some people say. They suggest Paul is saying, "You know what you are to do and if you don't, I will come see you," and that the letter to Philemon is a type of a threat. On the contrary, I believe it is a truthful, tactful letter containing a basic appeal to Philemon: an appeal to good rapport (which we see in verses 4 to 10), an appeal to persuade Onesimus to do the right thing (in verses 11 to 19), and an appeal to the emotions at the end of the letter (in verses 20-21). The approach that Paul takes to the issue is that of a tactful appeal, and I think that is very important.

Verse 19 is one of the verses people use in order to identify this letter as kind of an ironic letter, or a letter of compelling Philemon. Paul does remind Philemon that he owes Philemon as well. However, I still believe that the overall tone is genuine and that he honestly means that he will pay. If Philemon insists on being paid, Paul will pay him. However, if there is softness in the heart of Philemon, he will realize that he owes Paul himself. You could turn verse 19 in a manipulative way, and you could read the whole letter that way, but in balance, I think there is a very serious, compelling appeal here.

What is going on here? Let us look at the content of the letter. At first glance, the question may arise of why such a short letter would even appear in the canon of God's Word. In addition, the letter is highly personal. It is a personal appeal of Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Paul praises the love of Philemon. He beseeches him, and he appeals on behalf of Onesimus. What is the purpose of this letter being in God's Word, and what is Paul approaching here with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus? I believe that an enormous, profound consequence can be drawn from this letter: namely, the practical

question of how to deal with a runaway slave in first century Asia Minor from the all-important standpoint of life in and under the authority of Christ. How should an issue like this be handled? Imagine an impossible situation in your life, and then try to relate the Christian truth and faith to that problem. That is what Paul is facing here. Let me develop this somewhat. We need to look a little at slavery in the Greco-Roman world to understand the impossible situation that Paul is faced with, the situation of a runaway slave. Let us look at that a little bit.

You might be interested to know the different ways that a person might become a slave. Perhaps the most significant point was one's birth; many people were simply born as slaves. The children of slaves became slaves automatically. Also, as one country defeated another, prisoners of war became a source for new slaves, so there were various political reasons for that pattern.

We know from ancient records that slaves fled frequently in antiquity, and there were five ways that a slave could get away. First, he could join a gang; he could join a group of runaway slaves. Secondly, he could go undercover in a big city and change his identity. Third, he could flee abroad. A fourth possibility is that he could flee into a less populated rural area and work as a fruit picker or something like that. Finally, he could seek asylum in a temple such as the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, in order to negotiate the purchase by a kinder or a less inhumane master, depending on the circumstances. So there were ways of getting away from this horrible system of slavery, but there was one enormously serious deterrent to this: fugitive slaves were, at times, recaptured by professionals and punished at least by beating, possibly by branding, or, in the worst case, by crucifixion. There was a very vicious, highly suppressive, horrible system of slavery in place, and it is sad to say that that system has continued for many centuries since then.

Which of these situations applies to Onesimus? He is probably a slave who chose option #3: flee abroad. Onesimus tries to take cover with a known apostle, so there is a knock at Paul's door one night, and he knows that if he becomes involved with this person, he cannot win. It is a lose-lose situation. If you keep him out, you will be bothered by your conscience for the rest of your life, but if you let him in you will be subject to severe penalties yourself. That is what Paul faces with Onesimus, a runaway slave who should be returned to a horrible reception. What should Paul do? How should he respond? How should he deal with this situation? In that time, if you gave shelter to a runaway slave, it was potentially hazardous to yourself. You could be punished for giving cover to a slave. It was comparable to keeping Jews in your home during Nazi Germany, as Corrie ten Boom's family did in Holland. Any way you look at it, this is a very difficult and tension-laden situation.

What is Paul's procedure here concerning Onesimus? I believe Paul first took a step back and looked at the total situation. There is a possibility that Onesimus ran away with some money. It is certainly possible, although we cannot know for sure, but there may have been some injustice done to his master. It is likely that Onesimus became a Christian either before or during this time under the tutelage of Paul. Verse 10 makes allusion to that, saying, "I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains." So there is some connection here in terms of Paul preaching the Gospel to Onesimus.

How does Paul proceed? Amazingly, verse 12 says that Onesimus is to return to his former master. I cannot believe it. Paul does not resist this need that Onesimus be restored to and reconciled with his former master. So he says to Onesimus (I am paraphrasing), "If you ran from problems before, face them now." However, if that were all Paul did, that would be cruel. The next step is that Paul writes an accompanying letter. It is a letter of appeal; it is not a letter of recommendation, as far as I am concerned. Some interpreters would like to see it that way. I think it is a letter of appeal, which says,

“Face your problems, but you will not face them alone. I will stand by you.” This is a wonderful second step: “Face your problems, but you will not face them alone. I will advocate for you,” but Paul advances this even further. He appeals in the letter to Philemon, the former master of Onesimus, to receive him, verse 17. No matter what took place, no matter what the injustice was, the broken relationship needs to be restored. So Paul tells Onesimus, “Go back to the problem. I will advocate for you and help you; the relationship needs to be mended and restored.”

The fourth point of the procedure that Paul takes is perhaps the most telling one. He says, “I will pay for any damages that this Onesimus may have incurred to you, Philemon. Perhaps you lost money while he was not working for you, or maybe he misappropriated funds—you see, that is not the big issue. He may have done some wrong things, but that is not the issue.” Paul is willing to both advocate for Onesimus and appeal to Philemon in this situation. Note again the principles we see here: if you ran from problems, face them in Christ. You are not alone in facing them. The relationship needs to be mended and I, the apostle, will help with the mending, whatever it costs. I will stake my reputation and my means toward the reconciliation of this situation.” I think what Paul is doing is absolutely formidable here at this juncture in his argument.

Some people have asked, then, whether Paul is supporting slavery. That is a larger issue that I do not now have the time to address in terms of the entire New Testament. Here, obviously, he is practicing what he preaches in Colossians: that the masters need to live knowing they have a master, and those who are under authority need to serve their master as they would serve the Lord. Obviously, slavery must be abolished. I do believe, however, that a system of authority and submission in the workplace is still retained.

I believe that if you follow Philemon to the end, you will have a reconciled relationship—you will have Philemon living as under the Lord. You will not have him do what is done in the society with a so-called runaway slave. You will have a reconciled relationship. You will have Philemon most likely saying to Paul, “Please, no, do not pay me anything; we will reconcile together and we will work this out together.” So within the awful structure of slavery at the time of Paul, there is here a principle of reconciliation and of overcoming that brings this to an authority and submission situation that moves out of the principles of slavery. Obviously, we would have to move much further into that; it is a very difficult area—why Paul even speaks about slavery. But I think we see here a lot of Gospel being brought into a very painful and destructive situation. Notice the main principle. Paul says whatever it takes to bring the Gospel into the situation—“As much as I can, I will bring it.” Isn't that an amazing principle of pastoral care? You identify with Onesimus and his feelings, you identify with Philemon and his dealings and actions, and then you think what is needed; then as a minister, as a messenger of reconciliation, you bring in that which is necessary for these two factions—these two representatives of the social structures of the day—to be reconciled. As a minister you bring in what is necessary for Onesimus to be restored and for there to be a heartfelt, reconciled relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. I very much agree with Bruce who says, concerning this process that Paul is leading toward: “What this letter does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution [of slavery] could only wilt and die.” The institution of slavery could not long endure if these three factors were in place: that a master receives his slave again without punishment, that a slave returns and is willing to accept the consequences of his actions, and that there is a third party as an advocate who says, “I intend to watch over you two to see that this is done in a godly way, and especially to see that the slave will not be punished too harshly. I will listen; I will be there; I will pay, I will give.” What is growing out of that, except that the presence of God is within all those spheres, is an authority and submission situation in which the abuse is not propagated.

The question could be raised of why Paul could not appeal to Philemon to set Onesimus free? I believe that may have been a further step after reconciliation, but first, a wrong had to be put right. I believe that is the step Paul is taking here. Within the structure, something went wrong, and it must be put right within the structure, but certainly after a reconciliation it would have been possible for Philemon to free Onesimus. That is within the range of what is possible. However, I think his work is cut out for him first. I find that quite significant. I tend to not go this painful route. I tend to say, "Let us forget it and move on." Paul, however, really deals with the issue of a broken relationship.

Some people might want to make the point that this seems to be more similar to the Old Testament principles of servants and masters than to the situation between slaves and masters in the Greco-Roman world. I think that is certainly there. It is not explicitly stated, but it is present, which is why I agree with Bruce at this point and say that this milieu simply dissolves some of the unjust and horrible elements. I do not believe that the system of authority and submission is wrong, but it is misused and abused in the form of slavery, which the Gospel is clearly addressing.

What are the consequences as we look at this micro-example of reconciliation? I believe, and this is a dangerous phrase for me to use here, that the order of authority and submission is not broken, but rather redeemed from slavery by bringing Christ into a wrong social structure. I find that Paul is so mature, so incredibly able, that he brings Christ into that situation and redeems it to become a godly structure of authority and submission. He does this by appealing to Philemon to know what his responsibilities are before Christ. That is the wonderful thing: that all participants of an unjust system are coming under the authority of the Lord. That is the first step of hope, when all participants of an unjust system come under the authority of the Lord. That is why there is hope in the church, although there still is a lot of work to be done on exactly that whole point in our thinking and doing. All the parties of an unjust system come under the same authority of the Lord.

There is a little bit of word play on the name "Onesimus," which means "useful." What had been useless is now useful. That word play on "usefulness" perhaps speaks of the fact that, as things are brought under Christ, there is a usefulness. And then, the real fruit of such a broken, and then reconciled relationship, is a closeness, respect, appreciation, and welcome.

I do not know if you have experienced a situation where there has been great strife, a great breach of trust between yourself and somebody else. I remember a time in my wife's life where such a situation occurred. Although it was not really the fault of either side, there was a severe breach of trust between my wife and another friend. It was so severe that the other party said, "There is no way we will ever be able to come back together in a reconciled way." She was a Christian and so was my wife. But that was the situation; there was such a great breach of trust. I think here between Philemon and Onesimus you could have that kind of breach of relationship. In my wife's situation, it was wonderful to see that, after months of prayer, appropriate distance, and allowing for space, there was a rapprochement and then a reconciliation. There was such a warm closeness thereafter that this other person said later on, "You know, we have never been this close before." It was the fruit of the same process of reconciliation that is being spoken of here.

The closeness, the respect, the appreciation, and the welcome are the wonderful fruit of reconciliation. And as we have been reconciled with God, as we have received forgiveness, it is given to us to move out and be used as tools of reconciliation. This wonderful testimony and hope is brought to us here as we study this letter of appeal by Paul.

One final consequence that we see here is that Paul does not avoid the broken pieces. Rather, he picks them up, takes them seriously, looks at them, and says, “This is what it needs to look like in Christ.” Isn’t that wonderful? There are broken pieces; there is a horrible, suppressive system. Obviously, Paul could have written a pre-Marxist letter against the evils of slavery and done quite well. But here he takes the broken pieces and he applies them to Christ, and sees that with these broken pieces something of reconciliation can be demonstrated. In the very point where there is the greatest pain, injustice, and problem, there the reconciliation begins. I believe that is why Paul was not so concerned about the system of slavery as about this, what is happening in Philemon, because if this type of reconciliation takes place, you do not need to rave against the system. It will be overcome from the inside out—from the church out. At the least, you will look at the church and say that the way Philemon and Onesimus are relating to each other does not conform to the Greco-Roman system of slavery. They have deviated. They have become untrue to the system. And praise God for that!

There is a great deal in this little letter that we can transfer into our lives. I will repeat again that we face the problems that we have. We look at them—and I’m talking to myself more than I’m talking to you, because I love to put my problems into the freezer or on the shelf. I just do not want to deal with those difficult issues in relationships. I anticipate problems and I put them aside and seek a place of rest. By contrast, Paul is kind of a self-guided missile, pointing directly to the issues we need to deal with. Paul has his finger on the most difficult place and then he says, “Okay, let us see what Christ means in this situation.” What courage! What a wonderful way to deal with this Onesimus and not give way to fear! Paul has found a wonderful way out, because he does not make himself guilty by supporting an unjust system or by simply giving cover to Onesimus. He moves beyond the whole mess. He faces the issue, then he places himself alongside Onesimus as an advocate. How I need to grow in that area—to advocate for those who are in a place of weakness or a place of injustice, and to use whatever little weight I may have as an advocate for them; then, to actively seek a reconciled relationship, that warmth that may have never existed. That is the fruit of having faced and dealt with the problems at hand. The next principle is that I, as a servant of Christ, must be willing to give whatever it takes because I am not seeking my own. I am seeking that the Gospel will be brought to the fore. Paul longs for his co-laborers to be participating in a way that I cannot imagine because all about him he sees so much of a need for signs, signals, and deeds of reconciliation, so that the church would more and more reflect God’s forgiveness. There is a great need there, a great need to advocate and to stand in the breach—to cover the bridge.

When I was walking here and reflecting on how I would describe Philemon, I thought of a song, “Bridge over Troubled Water,” by Simon and Garfunkel. I think there is a very important point here—this bridge over troubled water—that Paul is willing to become very involved in a selfless way. If we are used as such tools of reconciliation, imagine what will happen. Imagine how that will expand outward, how that will communicate and ease misunderstanding and troubles in relationships. I have just recently become aware that I may have a position of privilege. I am happy in that position of privilege, but I am insensitive toward some who may not have that position of privilege, and I need to use that on behalf of others rather than just to indulge myself. We see that with Paul: he could have said, “Look here, I am an apostle,” but there is none of that. He used his weight to advocate for justice; he used his weight to jump into the breach. It is a wonderful way to encourage us into a Gospel life. As Paul says, “Imitate what I do, imitate how I am, how I conduct myself.” We ought to be those kinds of people who do this Philemon type of life and work. Paul is not just talking; he is certainly doing here. I would expect that there was a wonderful conclusion in this situation.

Paul concludes with that short request and short blessing, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” That is not merely a routine closing. Paul is saying, “Remember the one who has pardoned

you, Philemon, the one who has given His grace to you. You were a slave, Philemon, do you remember? He has freed you. He has brought you into the light. May that grace be with you. Let that sink into your life, and rejoice in the reconciliation that you can find.” I think that we should stop here and allow that to sink into our hearts.