A Patristic Commentary



The Book of Philemon

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THE EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO PHILEMON

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PHILEMON

This epistle which consists of only one chapter, has such strong and beautiful statements that it is considered to be a gem in the Holy Bible. It reveals the real fatherhood of the ministers of Christ, Christian love, and forgiveness. It demonstrates the power of the gospel in winning over a runaway thief and slave, and in changing his master's mind. It reveals the faith that works by love.

AUTHOR

A personal letter of intercession written by St. Paul, probably from Rome, to Philemon at Colossae in Asia Minor (Col. 4: 7-9). It was written near the end St. Paul's first Roman imprisonment at the same time as Ephesians and Colossians.

PHILEMON

He was apparently a member of the Church of Colossae, which seems to have held its assemblies in his house [v. 2]; and he became its bishop.

Philemon's benevolence [v. 5-7] and St. Paul's request for him to prepare a lodging [v. 22] indicate that he was a man of some means.

St. Paul had never been in Colossae (Col. 2: 1), Philemon must have met him elsewhere, possibly in Ephesus, which was not far away. Some scholars believe that, though not recorded, that St. Paul visited Colossae during his three years stay at Ephesus (Acts).

It would seem that Philemon owed his conversion to St. Paul [v. 19].

THE STORY OF ONESIMUS

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, who robbed his master and ran away to Rome [v. 18]. His conduct was in sharp contrast to his

name which means "useful" or "profitable" [v. 11], yet he was a very talented man. In about A.D. 61 or 62, he had been brought face to face with St. Paul, probably through his fellow-townsman Epaphras (Col. 4: 12). Onesimus found Christ as his Savior, was baptized, and became His devoted disciple (Col. 4: 9). St. Paul would have chosen to keep Onesimus in Rome as a helper [v. 13], but did not have the consent of Philemon [v. 14]. St. Paul felt that it was his Christian duty to send the slave home and plead with Philemon to take him back. So the apostle wrote this priceless epistle of intercession, pleading with Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus as his brother.

THE EPISTLE MESSAGE

St. Paul wished to save the runaway slave from the severe and cruel punishment he deserved according to Roman law, which gave the runaway slave no rights of life or liberty.

This epistle shows St. Paul as an example of the following:

1. **The pastoral or fatherly love** towards everybody, especially the lowly. He used to take care of everyone, even a runaway slave, as if he was his only son.

2. **Wisdom in dealing with Philemon**, who was injured by his runaway slave Onesimus. At the same time, St. Paul realized the Christian brotherhood that obliterated all social and class distinctions.

3. Regarding the duty of **obedience to the law** on the part of converts, Onesimus must return to his master.

4. Using **the abilities and gifts of every member of the church**, St. Paul noticed that the converted slave was very gifted, could serve Christ [v. 17, 18] and work for the edification of the Church. Onesimus helped the Apostle Paul and then was ordained bishop, taking care of Christ's people.

5. **Interceding for others**: St. Paul's intercession for Onesimus breathes the unique propitious intercession of Christ for His own

before the Father. St. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself, and to put any demerit on his account. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our representative before the Father; all our sins are reckoned or imputed to His account.

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CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

✞ St. Paul called himself "**a prisoner of Jesus Christ**" [v. 1], perhaps to incite Philemon to accept his advice because it is issued by St. Paul as his suffering father. He spoke not with the authority of an apostle, but as a friend to a friend.

✞ Truly, Onesimus was worthy of being imprisoned; St. Paul willingly accepted imprisonment for the preaching of the gospel to sinners, one of whom was Onesimus.

✞ The Epistle is addressed to Philemon, his beloved sister, Apphia, Archippus, and the whole church, meaning that even the personal dealings between Philemon and Onesimus were not private, but they had an effect on the whole church. **What we do, say, or even think has its effect on the life of the church; for we are members of each other.**

✞ St. Paul behaved wisely in his appeal to the injured Philemon:

1. He showed his deep love towards him, as he mentioned that he was always praying for him, even while he was in prison [v. 4]. In other words, he was not absorbed in his own sufferings, but in taking care of Philemon, even in his prayers, for **his love to him is greater than suffering.**

2. He mentioned Philemon's love and faith [v. 5-7], therefore what he asked concerning Onesimus' forgiveness was not hard for Philemon. On the contrary, Philemon did this joyfully through his abundant love and living faith.

3. He was a wonderful student of human nature. The picture he portrayed of himself as an aged prisoner of Jesus Christ [v. 9] opened a fountain of sympathy in the heart of Philemon as he read his friend's letter, for he acknowledged that St. Paul had the right to be heard. He also showed that his request for Onesimus was small compared with the hardships he himself had endured for Christ's sake.

4. Onesimus is shown in a new position by his conversion. He became the son of St. Paul who was born in the apostle's bonds [v. 10],

the bowls of St. Paul [v. 12];

a profitable one to St. Paul and Philemon; served the apostle during his imprisonment instead of Philemon [v. 13];

a beloved brother in the flesh and in the Lord [v. 16];

representative of St. Paul himself [v. 17].

Onesimus, who was a runaway slave, through the grace of God became a son and brother.

"You are all the sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ...There is neither bond nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3: 26-28)."

5. St. Paul had the authority to give orders to Philemon, who was converted by his preaching, but he desired Philemon to practice love willingly [v. 14].

6. St. Paul undertook the task of repaying what Onesimus had robbed. **He didn't defend the slaves faults,** but he was ready to pay the price of those faults. He did not minimize his sins, but he pleaded for forgiveness for him. St. Paul imitated Christ as He bore our sins in His own body on the Cross.

7. It is **the source of inner joy to St. Paul** that Philemon practised this Christian love [v. 20]

8. It is God's goodness that changes even the faults of Onesimus to the advantage of many people. Onesimus was separated from his master for a while yet returned a profitable brother in Christ to him and to all believers.

9. St. Paul believed that Philemon would do even more than St. Paul asked of him [v. 22].

10. St. Paul was not waiting for an answer, for he trusted in Philemon's faith, love, and obedience. It was a time to prepare a lodging for St. Paul, who would soon be freed from prison.

At last, in the conclusion of his letter he sent the greetings of the saintly ministers as if they also interceded for Onesimus with St. Paul.

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SLAVERY AND CHRISTIANITY

In the Roman Empire slavery was not based on a certain race. It often began as victorious generals chose to enslave conquered enemies rather than killing them. Slavery was also a form of punishment for crimes, or a means of dealing with debtors unable to repay loans.

Unwanted children were frequently sold as slaves. Children of slaves were themselves slaves. Some kidnap victims were sold into the slavery market.

This letter reveals the Christian way of dealing with social problems, such as slavery.

At that time the Roman society not only accepted slavery, but was widely dependent on it. St. Paul was certainly against this evil order, but he clearly believed that alleviation of this system could best come some other way than revolution. The Christians could set an example to the world at large concerning the way in which Christianity could transform the system from within, and by this means could mitigate its evils.

Onesimus was merely one of a world of slaves. Roman masters owned from ten to two hundred, even a thousand or more slaves. St. Paul did not demand the abolition of slavery, but he showed that slavery can never be the fruit of Christianity.

Christianity does not merely free the slaves but teaches that slaves and their masters are one in Christ, dear brothers in the family of God.

According to the tradition, Philemon received his returning slave, and gave him his liberty. That is the way the gospel works. Christ in the heart of the slave made him recognize the social responsibilities of his day, and go back to his master determined to be a good slave and live out his natural life as a slave. Christ in the heart of the master made him recognize the slave as a Christian brother and give him his liberty. Afterward, Onesimus became the bishop of Berea.

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QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How do Christians face social injustice?

2. How do we deal with injured brothers and with those who injured them?

3. Explain how St. Paul practiced apostleship as fatherly love more than as authority.

4. What is the relation between the Church's evangelistic and social activities?

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WHEN WILL I SEE ALL BECOME FREE?!

✞ I look to You, who are the desire of my soul!
I ask You who became a crucified Slave by Your own will,
to grant me the perfect freedom!
You received my slavery and granted me Your super freedom!
You paid the price of my slavery,
You purchased me by Your precious blood.
What can I repay You who are the liberator of my soul?!

✞ Grant me to be like Your apostle Paul.
I desire to pay the debt of my brethren.
I want to enslave my soul to gain many,
that I may become a slave and they become free.
I hope that I may suffer that they become comforted,
I may die every day so that they might live in You as free people.
When will I see all become free?!

✞ Teach me as You taught Your apostle Paul,
how I bore those who have been kicked out, despised and ignored,
in my deepest soul, in my bowls and heart?!
I bore them through love to the throne of Your grace!
I love then in truth, so that I may be in Your likeness, O the Beloved of my soul!

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