

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON



An Explanation of This Letter
Especially for You

Ger de Koning

ROCK
SOLID
8

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Rock Solid #8 (Part IV)

Ger de Koning

The original Dutch version is available at
Webshop: www.uitgeverijdaniel.nl
Orders: info@uitgeverijdaniel.nl

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Layout: Jan Noordhoek

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Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen – Genesis

Exo – Exodus

Lev – Leviticus

Num – Numbers

Deu – Deuteronomy

Jos – Joshua

Jdg – Judges

Rth – Ruth

1Sam – First Samuel

2Sam – Second Samuel

1Kgs – First Kings

2Kgs – Second Kings

1Chr – First Chronicles

2Chr – Second Chronicles

Ezra – Ezra

Neh – Nehemiah

Est – Esther

Job – Job

Psa – Psalms

Pro – Proverbs

Ecc – Ecclesiastes

Song – Song of Songs

Isa – Isaiah

Jer – Jeremiah

Lam – Lamentations

Eze – Ezekiel

Dan – Daniel

Hos – Hosea

Joel – Joel

Amos – Amos

Oba – Obadiah

Jona – Jonah

Mic – Micah
Nah – Nahum
Hab – Habakkuk
Zep – Zephaniah
Hag – Haggai
Zec – Zechariah
Mal – Malachi

New Testament

Mt – Gospel of Matthew
Mk – Gospel of Mark
Lk – Gospel of Luke
Jn – Gospel of John
Acts – Acts of the Apostles
Rom – Letter to the Romans
1Cor – First Letter to the Corinthians
2Cor – Second Letter to the Corinthians
Gal – Letter to the Galatians
Eph – Letter to the Ephesians
Phil – Letter to the Philippians
Col – Letter to the Colossians
1Thes – First Letter to the Thessalonians
2Thes – Second Letter to the Thessalonians
1Tim – First Letter to Timothy
2Tim – Second Letter to Timothy
Tit – Letter to Titus
Phlm – Letter to Philemon
Heb – Letter to the Hebrews
Jam – Letter of James
1Pet – First Letter of Peter
2Pet – Second Letter of Peter
1Jn – First Letter of John
2Jn – Second Letter of John
3Jn – Third Letter of John
Jude – Letter of Jude
Rev – Revelation

Explanation of general format

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

BRACKETS [] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

SHARP BRACKETS < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When ASTERISKS * are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

ALL CAPS in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

The Letter to Philemon

Introduction

Like the first and the second letter to Timothy and the letter to Titus this letter is also written to a person, Philemon. Nevertheless this one has a unique position between the letters that are addressed to persons.

Timothy and Titus received instructions regarding their personal behavior in the church. Paul taught them how they should deal with several situations and what to tell the believers. Those letters are of great importance to you as well. You learn by it what your personal behavior as a Christian should be in a professing Christianity where there is great confusion. You receive instructions on how you should function to the honor of God and to a blessing to the people around you.

The letter to Philemon has a different content. You do not find any doctrinal teaching in it. This letter is only about a practical matter. Paul addresses in this letter a believing master, Philemon, about a slave, Onesimus, who ran away from him and who is sent back by him, Paul. It is a letter about a slave who is in debt to his master. Paul wants to help that master to receive his slave, who has wronged him, in love. In this letter you see that Christian faith not only consists of what you believe, but also of how you practice it.

It is not only about having knowledge about God and the Lord Jesus, but also about exhibiting the features of God and the Lord Jesus. As an apostle Paul could have demanded that Philemon should accept Onesimus back and even release him. But Paul does not take his position as apostle here. He wants to show the practical application of the teaching. He shows that it is not only important that you speak about the truth, but that it is also important to apply the truth and how to do that. It is not only about saying the good thing, but also that you say it well. It is the tone that makes the music.

You may think: 'What could I learn from an event that lies so far away from my world of life? It would be more helpful if I learn to know my

position in Christ and how to show that in my life than knowing how Philemon should receive his slave.' That would be a fallacy. Precisely the letter to Philemon grants us, like no other letter, an example of how you are to show your position in Christ.

Although the letter contains no doctrinal teaching, you will notice that it could only be written by somebody who has absorbed the whole truth in his heart. When you are reading this letter you will taste that the whole life and the whole mind of the writer are permeated with what he is in Christ. He applies in practice what he writes about the truth of the one body (the letter to the Ephesians) and the mind of Christ (the letter to the Philippians) and the new man (the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to the Colossians).

What is described here ought to be the daily practice of the believers in comparable situations. Although we do not have to do with slavery you may have to do with situations where another person owes you something, like Onesimus did to Philemon. It can be the case that you know of other people who find themselves in such situations. You may take a mediating role then, like Paul mediates here between Onesimus and Philemon. We learn from this letter how we should deal with such situations. That is the purpose of this letter and it should be read in that way.

In this letter you will search in vain for instructions on how to deal with slavery or how you should look at it. It is not about that at all. Christendom does not change circumstances, but the hearts of people. But even if the heart has been changed it does not mean that the believer willingly subjects himself to the circumstances. I find it quite difficult sometimes how to deal with the injustice that is done toward me. That also indeed depends on the nature of the injustice. In this letter it is about stealing possessions and the refusal of bearing responsibilities.

There is another injustice where something is being taken away in a much deeper sense. Then I think of physical abuse or the manipulation of your will. It will be evident that this injustice is of another kind than the injustice that induced this letter. But in case you do have to do with this terrible injustice, then you need to learn how to deal with it also. That will be quite

a difficult process, but with the help from the Lord and from the people you trust, you can achieve a lot.

Philemon most apparently lived in Colossae, as it can be derived from the letter to the church there (Col 4:9). Therefore there is a strong connection between the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians. There is something else that indicates a strong connection between the letter to Philemon on the one hand and the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to the Colossians on the other hand. In the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to the Colossians the masters of the slaves are directly addressed as such (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1). Philemon is also one of those and he too is addressed directly.

It seems that he came to faith through the service of Paul. That is what you can read between the lines in verse 19. Paul had never been in Colossae (Col 2:1) and must have met Philemon somewhere else. That encounter or those encounters ultimately led to his conversion. He then worked together with Paul and also with Timothy (Phlm 1:1).

Here Philemon is back at Colossae. It is most likely that the woman who is mentioned here, Apphia, is his wife. It has been assumed that Archippus is his son, but that is no more than an assumption. Philemon must have had a fairly large house, for the church gathers together in his house. The fact that he has at least one slave, Onesimus, may imply that he is not impecunious.

It is about Onesimus in this letter. Onesimus was an unconverted slave who had fled. He certainly did not flee because of a cruel treatment by Philemon. The problem was more with himself. It has every appearance that he was a useless young man (Phlm 1:11). Before his conversion he did not justify his name, for the name Onesimus means 'useful'. In fact, it seems he had become a thief.

Philemon will not have put him on a chain, but will have given him a great deal of freedom. Philemon trusted him. Onesimus seriously misused that trust. He not only ran away at a certain moment, but also provided himself with the necessary. He had to live, too, of course. Perhaps he felt he was not taking more than the back pay. A person who does not let himself be

led by the Lord can have the weirdest ideas about 'mine and thine' and will also act accordingly.

Whether Rome was his destination or whether he arrived there after wandering is not known. Anyway the Lord led it in such a way that he met the apostle there. It is possible that he 'accidentally' bumped into the apostle. He ended up into conversation with him and the Lord opened his heart so that he came to conversion. It is also not unthinkable that on his own initiative he sought the apostle about whom he must have heard a lot in the house of Philemon. The Lord might have made his conscience restless and reminded him of Paul who had been imprisoned somewhere in Rome.

In any case, he was with Paul and came to repentance through Paul's service (Phlm 1:10). Due to that, his relationship with God turned out well. Now he still had to put things right in his relationship with Philemon. He still had a way to go regarding that.

So you see that through conversion not all problems disappear at once. Conversion is the beginning of a new life. From that moment growing in faith and abandoning the past go hand in hand. Everything of which you know or through which you later see that you wronged someone, you need to put right. That's why after my conversion I went to the owner of a shop where I as a youngster regularly stole candy. I had an amount with me as a payment. That was, as far as I can remember, by no means the value of the stolen candy, but the owner accepted the payment I had with me and forgave me.

Apparently Onesimus did not think with joy about returning to his master. Nevertheless he acknowledged the necessity of it, probably after he was convinced by Paul. Paul also promised him his unconditional support. He took the responsibility to help Onesimus toward Philemon.

The way he does that is not of the kind that we mean when we are talking about 'saying something nice for someone'. He did not simply send Onesimus back, but he sent him back with a letter of recommendation. In that letter Paul testifies of the veracity of Onesimus' conversion and of the great usefulness of him after his conversion. You can learn from Paul in this. You can examine in what way you could help and encourage someone who is dealing with such a situation like that of Onesimus.

You can also learn from Onesimus. By nature you are also a runaway Onesimus, who was of no use at all (Rom 3:12). That has been changed by your conversion. By the power of the Holy Spirit you are now able to be useful to your environment. That you have changed is first and most noticeable in the area where you are engaged daily, such as at home, the neighborhood where you live, and at school or at work. Precisely where Onesimus was as a slave he now can show that he is useful.

That is the way how God sends us back to our environment, our family, working place to be a witness there, to be useful for the Lord (Mk 5:19). You and I are God's 'Onesimus'.

Now read the letter thoroughly one more time.

Reflection: Have you made right, as far as you can recall, the injustice you have done toward others?

Phlm 1:1-3 | Senders, Recipients and Blessing

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved [brother] and fellow worker, 2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

V1. As it is remarked in the introduction Paul doesn't take the position of an apostle here. If he had done that, he would have taken his authority as a starting point for what he is going to write. He could have done that, as he later says in verse 8. Still he does not do that on this occasion. The point is that his purpose is not to make known or to defend the truth, but it is about something else. He wants to reach the heart of Philemon; he wants to have a heart-to-heart contact with him. Therefore he doesn't look at the different positions they have in the church, but what they possess together. Paul wants to talk with Philemon from the grace they both have received from God. Paul even takes still a lower step by adopting the attitude of someone who is asking Philemon for a favor.

From that attitude he wants to express his feelings and to appeal to those of Philemon about someone they both know and that is Onesimus. But each of them knows him differently. Philemon knows Onesimus from the past, Paul knows him from the present. Between the past and the present is the conversion of Onesimus. Paul knows the good consequences of his conversion. Philemon only knows his past life and its adverse results. Paul knows about that. Therefore he doesn't wipe Onesimus' past clean or try to pretend that it was not that bad. The only thing he wants is to persuade Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him back. That's why he adopts this humble attitude.

In that way he shows Philemon how he desires that Philemon, the master, deals with Onesimus, the runaway slave. In this way Philemon can show the grace of the apostle, or better said the grace of the Lord. The Lord has humbled Himself more than anyone ever did. Not that He gave up anything of what He is in Himself. But He was able to do something in His humiliation that absolutely could not be done in any other way. That is to impress the heart of His own by His graceful dealings (Jn 13:13-15). In the same way Paul could not deny his apostleship, but he could bypass it for

this moment and give an example of a loving approach. In that humble attitude he can request something rather than command something.

So Paul doesn't present himself as an apostle, but as a "prisoner of Christ Jesus". That must have already immediately touched the heart of Philemon. The sender of the letter is someone who endures suffering for the sake of Christ. You can also tell the difference between a letter of someone for whom everything is going very well and a letter of someone who has (had) to go through many hardships. I assume that the one of the latter impresses you more.

Paul also says in other words that he is not a prisoner of men. People are just instruments in the hand of the Lord. Paul knows perfectly well to be in the hand of the Lord. He is not a plaything of destiny with the result to be a prisoner now. No, the Lord has brought him there, in order to have fellowship with this 'chosen vessel' and to share the deepest thoughts of His heart with the apostle. Due to that we now have three letters that inform us about the richest blessings of the Christian: the letter to the Ephesians, the letter to the Philippians and the letter to the Colossians.

In a special way Paul in his imprisonment also has fellowship with a brother like Epaphras, who shares in his imprisonment (verse 23; Col 4:12). And in this letter we also see how his heart is connected with Onesimus, who serves him in his imprisonment.

There is another sender, Timothy. Timothy is not an apostle, but he nevertheless has a special position in the church. But here also there is no mention of that special position. Timothy is presented as a "brother", an indication which you may see as a title, which also applies to Philemon. It is a title of great significance. In a general sense the sisters are also meant with 'brothers'. You see that when you know that the Lord Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brethren (Heb 2:11-12). In that way He connects Himself to all the believers.

Paul uses this title several times in order to appeal to the heart of Philemon (verses 7,20). This is how Paul was addressed by Ananias directly after his conversion (Acts 9:17). And during the time of his service the heart of the apostle always sought rest in the fellowship of the brothers and sisters.

We are each other's brothers through all eternity. It is an eternal family relationship originated through the work of the Lord Jesus. His first expression of joy after He fulfilled the work of redemption is: "Go to My brethren." The fellowship of the believers with their Father and their God is that of the Lord Jesus with His Father and His God (Jn 20:17).

Paul addresses Philemon. That name means 'one who loves' or 'rich in love'. He is worthy of that name, as it appears from verse 5. He is rich in love and has shown his love to others. Therefore it is inevitable for others to love him. He who loves is also loved himself. Paul has experienced his love (verse 7) and calls him "beloved". Philemon is loved by God, by Paul and Timothy and by all who have noticed the love of Philemon.

The love of Philemon also goes out to the work of the Lord. He is a "fellow worker" of Paul and Timothy in the service for the Lord. This is again a proof that Paul mentions everything by which he can connect himself with Philemon.

V2. It doesn't seem farfetched to me to assume that Apphia is the wife of Philemon. It is the only time that the apostle mentions the name of a woman in the salutation of his letters. That would be not appropriate on other occasions, but here it is very appropriate. Apphia has also been a victim, maybe the greatest victim. She lost a servant. Paul also adds something to her name. He calls her "sister", with which he indicates the precious bond of faith in the Lord Jesus through which they are connected to one another. There is also nothing here that indicates that Paul has a higher position in the church.

Archippus was probably a housemate, otherwise he would not have been mentioned together with the heads of the family in the salutation. It has been assumed that he was their son. There are no indications of that. He might have stayed with them in their house for some time, maybe because he needed some rest and recovery of strength. After all he is a partaker of the fight for the gospel. It may even be the case that he had difficulty with taking part again in the fight, for he had to be encouraged to fulfill his ministry (Col 4:17).

By mentioning these names he expresses that they have fellowship with each other, that they share a common possession together. Through Christ

they are connected to each other and have an interest in each other. This fellowship goes right through all differences that may be in social positions, in gender, in language. In the light of the cross, there are no differences. In the new creation God is all and in all. In Christ there is neither Jew (Paul) nor Greek (Philemon) and neither slave (Onesimus) nor free man (Philemon) (Gal 3:28).

The church in the house of Philemon is also involved in this matter. They undoubtedly had knowledge of what had happened. When Onesimus comes back they should also know how that happened. They will also know that a new brother has been added to them. The whole church must welcome this runaway slave in the mind of Christ.

In the letter to the Colossians Paul writes nothing about Onesimus as a runaway slave. There he only presents him as a faithful and beloved brother (Col 4:9). The problem between Onesimus and Philemon should be made known to the ones who are directly involved.

The church in the house of Philemon is not what is called today in the Western world, a 'house church'. A house church can arise because of several reasons. It consists of a number of believers who regularly gather in a house, in order to share something with one another about the faith in Christ. Each house church stands by itself. People especially appreciate the small scale and therefore experience the personal attention more.

It is certainly not unbiblical to form a house church, but it is not being a church as you encounter it in the Bible. A church in the biblical sense considers the regulations that are particularly given in the letter to the Corinthians on the gathering of the church. That also happened in the house of Philemon and in other cases where there is mention of a 'church in a house' (cf. Rom 16:5; 1Cor 16:19; Col 4:15).

In the Bible there is mention of the church at a certain town. In that town believers may come together in different locations, but that doesn't mean that there are more churches in that town. This is how the first Christians gathered together to break bread in many locations in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46). It was indeed not possible to gather together with those other thousands of believers at one place in Jerusalem. Nevertheless the Scripture

always speaks about the church in Jerusalem and not about the churches in Jerusalem.

The house of Philemon is at Colossae. There is the church. The fact that people gather together at two places in Colossae doesn't mean that at one place (a certain building) there is a large 'real' church and at the other place (in that house) there is a house church. Both places together are the one church at Colossae.

V3. Paul concludes his salutation with the well-known greeting. "Grace" is the unmerited favor with which God and the Lord Jesus have saved us and with which They stand beside us. "Peace" is the result of it. It is the rest in view of all circumstances, due to the awareness that everything is in the hand of "God our Father", that makes you aware of His love for His children. The same goes for "the Lord Jesus Christ" Who is the Lord of His servants.

Now read Philemon 1:1-3 again.

Reflection: What is the difference between the salutation of this letter and that in other letters and why?

Phlm 1:4-10 | Love and Faith and a Plea

4 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; 6 [and I pray] that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. 8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you [to do] what is proper, 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal [to you]—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

V4. Paul starts with, as he more often does at the beginning of a letter, giving thanks to God for what he hears about Philemon. Toward Philemon he speaks about “my God”. That indicates a personal intimate relationship that Paul has with God. Such a relationship is of great significance. I hope that you also can say of God ‘my God’ and that you have an intimate fellowship with Him in making petitions for others.

Paul always remembers Philemon in his prayers. When he mentions the name of Philemon it is not to tell God about the concerns he has about him. You certainly may bring the concerns you have about others before God. But there are also believers of whom you become grateful when you remember them because they have so much love and faith. Do you show that to them at a certain moment?

There is no doubt that it did Philemon well that Paul always remembers him in his prayers. In spite of the fact that they probably have not seen each other for some years Paul has not forgotten him. I hope that you also continue to pray for believers whom you have ever met and who made such an impression on you that your prayer for them doesn't weaken.

V5. The reason of Paul's gratitude is due to the messages that he received about Philemon. In those messages is testified to his “love” and “faith.” ‘Love’ and ‘faith’ go hand in hand. ‘Love’, the main theme of this letter, is first mentioned here. Philemon has love “toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints”. That also goes hand in hand. It is not possible for you to say that you love the Lord Jesus and at the same time hate your

brothers and sisters (cf. 1Jn 4:20). 'Faith' means confidence of faith, but can also be translated with faithfulness. Philemon trusts the Lord Jesus and he trusts the saints.

It may be easy to trust the Lord Jesus, but do you also trust your brothers and sisters? It is an essential condition for a sound fellowship that you trust each other. That has got nothing to do with ignorance. Of course you are realistic enough to know that it may even occur that you are cheated by someone. Still, you are never too trusting when it comes to saints. If you are suspicious about them, if you assume that they are not honest without having any clear indications of that, it will be harmful for the fellowship. Suspicion is a great evil. With Philemon you see the contrary.

Paul does not say these things to flatter Philemon. It is really true that Philemon has love and faith toward all saints. At the same time Paul certainly says that with the purpose to prepare him for what he will soon ask for Onesimus. This runaway slave now belongs also to 'all saints'. It is as if Philemon is now being tested in his love by showing that love toward Onesimus. You probably experience that yourself at times that it is sometimes easier to love brothers and sisters who live far away from you than those you meet daily and have daily intercourse.

As you get to know each other better, the result may be that the love diminishes and even fades away, but it also may possibly increase. Of course the purpose is that the latter happens. It is also like that in a marriage. At the beginning you see no evil in each other. But once you get to know each other better you also learn about the less pleasant sides of each other. It turns out wrong if you start to blame each other. It makes the bond stronger and stronger if you accept each other in that.

V6. After expressing his thanks for what he heard about Philemon Paul tells him why he prays for him, indicated and introduced by the word "that". He wishes that the "fellowship of" Philemon's "faith may become effective", that it may acknowledge that every good thing which is in him toward Christ. This also serves as a preparation to bring the heart of Philemon in line with the feelings of Paul. Philemon will have to be strong in the fellowship of his faith to be able to forgive Onesimus and to welcome him as a brother. Onesimus belongs now to that fellowship of faith. To see him

as such means to Philemon, who has been cheated by him, that he needs the strength of the Lord. The Lords wants to give him that.

To make that clear to Philemon Paul wants Philemon to know what is in his heart for the Lord. His heart is full of the good toward Christ. This awareness will make it easier for him to forgive and welcome Onesimus.

The good in Philemon is not the flesh. Nothing good dwells in it (Rom 7:18). The good is the faith and its effect. Where there is faith there is also the good. Where there is no faith there is nothing good.

V7. Paul has heard good things about the service of Philemon. The most inward feelings of the saints have been refreshed by Philemon. Everyone who came into contact with him saw and experienced his faith and love. They were quickened by that, which has to do with rest, with a labor break, through which new strength is gained to continue the work.

These messages also have a beneficial effect with Paul, who is pleased and comforted by them. It is wonderful if you can have such a joy from the good messages you hear about someone.

Paul again addresses him as “brother”. It is fitting for the structure of a letter with a special appeal to the feelings of the believer. In this way Paul emphasizes that he and Philemon stand on the same foundation of grace. Any sharpness in tone is absent.

V8. It is not that Paul doesn’t dare to command him to welcome Onesimus as a brother. He even has “enough confidence” to do that. It is also confidence “in Christ”. It is as if Christ gives him the liberty to order Philemon. In case he had done that he would not have done anything wrong.

V9. Nevertheless he doesn’t make any use of that confidence because he has a higher motive: that of love. You see that, even though you have the boldness to do something, it is not a natural thing to make use of it.

If you want to make a well-considered decision like Paul does here, it is necessary to be close to the Lord, to have His mind and to seek only the interest of the Lord and that of the other. After all, it is much easier to order someone to do something, certainly if you are qualified to, than to, with a great deal of difficulty, persuade another person to take a certain action. To act like that, you absolutely must, like Paul, have understood

something of the love of God as the core of Christendom. That is not about giving orders, the fulfilling of a law, but about faith that works through love (Gal 5:6).

There are certainly rules you are to obey (e.g. 2Thes 3:6). But here it is about showing grace and love, about dealing with each other as believers, accepting each other. You cannot achieve that through an order. To achieve that an appeal to love must be made, like Paul does to the love of Philemon. Besides, an order wouldn't be fitting to the love that Philemon is known for.

Paul places himself before the heart of Philemon as "such a person as Paul, the aged" and also as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ". Paul must have been about sixty years of age here. That is not really old for our understanding. Yet he calls himself an old man, which is undoubtedly due to the many hardships he went through. Apparently you could tell that from his face.

Anyway, for the spiritual eye of Philemon no impressive appearance arises, a man with personality and a fervent speech. For the natural feeling the once great apostle has no dignity anymore. But precisely this presentation appeals more to the affection of Philemon's heart when he hears the great apostle supplicate in such a humble manner for the sake of Onesimus. He sees how Paul takes the place of a poor petitioner (Pro 18:23a).

V10. Up till now Philemon could have been wondering what Paul wanted, what the appeal he wants to make consists of. Then Paul comes up with his purpose. He wants to make an appeal to Philemon for the sake of Onesimus. If Paul would have mentioned that name just like that, all kinds of unpleasant memories and bad feelings could have arisen with Philemon. But Paul precedes the name Onesimus by a description that undoubtedly have softened the feelings of Philemon.

Paul speaks about Onesimus as "my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment". This message sounds almost like a birth announcement. A birth goes together with joy. Often the card of the birth announcement says that 'with joy' the birth is being announced. Likewise you feel the joy of Paul when he announces to Philemon by this description that he had begotten a spiritual child in his imprisonment.

Most apparently the sensitive Philemon must have felt, while reading this, that this event must have been a great consolation to Paul. Paul experiences there, while he is restricted in his movement that he was allowed to bring someone to the Lord. That is without question God's work.

I do not know whether he was then already able to rejoice with Paul about this new birth, but it nevertheless must have softened his feelings. The letter is still not finished. Paul continues the preparatory work that should cause Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus.

'We call him Onesimus.' This is what could have been written on the birth announcement card. The meaning of that name is 'useful'. His parents have expressed their expectation by that name that his life would be like that. However, he did not meet with the expectations of his parents. It appeared to be the contrary. But that also changed through his conversion. The useless one becomes a useful one.

Each brother and sister should be like that. Love assumes that each brother and sister has a useful contribution. Conversion changes a person: one who thinks only of himself and is out for his own benefit, into someone who is useful to other people, from whom others have profit.

Now read Philemon 1:4-10 again.

Reflection: What could other people say about your love and faith?

Phlm 1:11-25 | Put That on My Account

11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, [sending] my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated [from you] for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as [you would] me. 18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). 20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. 22 At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 [as do] Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

V11. When Paul talks about the usefulness of Onesimus, he first points to the profit that Philemon will have and then only to the usefulness he himself had of him. He speaks about the usefulness that Philemon will have of Onesimus as a certainty. It seems that Paul is witnessing a development of the gift of grace in Onesimus. In his imprisonment he had much usefulness of that and he enjoyed that too.

V12. The value of Onesimus to Paul is that of his heart. That is a real recommendation. In case Philemon had already thought of a punishment for the injustice that Onesimus had caused him and the loss he had suffered, then he still could not hurt Paul's heart. He indeed would if he indeed would punish Onesimus. Paul clothes Onesimus with his own value toward Philemon. He calls him "my heart". Paul himself comes to Philemon in Onesimus, as it were. Philemon will surely accept him based on everything Paul means to Philemon. Here you learn how to reach the heart of someone else.

V13. Paul would love to have Onesimus to stay with him. What a help did that young man give him and what a joy also. Onesimus not only served him through his presence, but also through his work. He was a valuable servant of Paul who therefore would have preferred to keep him with him. Additionally, Paul saw in Onesimus a kind of substitute for Philemon. When Paul saw Onesimus he saw Philemon. In that way he was always reminded of Philemon. Philemon himself did not have the opportunity to visit the apostle in his imprisonment, but in this way it was compensated. That must have satisfied Philemon also.

V14. Paul does not manipulate with words to put Philemon spiritually under pressure. He wants to share with Philemon what was going through his mind, that Philemon may be more willing to forgive and receive Onesimus. By revealing the considerations of his heart to Philemon in this way he wants to soften the heart of Philemon. He renounces his own benefit he found with Onesimus for the sake of the benefit that Philemon will have of him. That is the true mind of Christ: renouncing something to grant others the benefit of it. Paul prefers to be alone if that will cause others to benefit with what delivered him benefit.

Paul's mode of action is different from what the law requires. According to the law he was not even supposed to send Onesimus back (Deu 23:15-16). But grace always goes further than the law, for Paul wants everything to turn out well between Philemon and Onesimus. Therefore he did not want to make use of the right to keep Onesimus with him. He wants to discuss that with Philemon, he does not want to force anything at all. Forcing a decision is not the right way. Then Philemon had to obey, but Paul did not want to deal with it like that. He wants to cause that the good deed of Philemon would not be "by compulsion", but of his "own free will".

If Paul had kept Onesimus with him he would have kept the law. He could have written that to Philemon. Then formally everything would have been in order. Philemon would have had nothing to say against that. Paul could have even written to Philemon that he should take up the courage to forgive Onesimus as a kind of obligation, as something 'that is right and proper to do'. But love is not to be forced. You can only stimulate love by showing it yourself. That causes the other to a voluntary action that is appreciated by the Lord (cf. 2Cor 8:8-9; 9:7).

V15-16. In these verses Paul gives another reason to take Onesimus back. Onesimus has become a brother. Paul even speaks about him as a “beloved brother”. He even says that the running away of Onesimus was the cause of his conversion. He does that though, in a way that it is absolutely not compromising the responsibility of Onesimus.

You can see that by the word “perhaps”. That indicates the cautiousness with which Paul draws the conclusion. He doesn’t speak out any absolute certainty because God may still have other goals. Paul speaks about a result that stands by itself and you should see that as a sovereign action of God. Perhaps you know from your own life some situations of which you must shamefully say that you then went your own way and that the Lord still used those situations to bring you back to Him. It doesn’t make your debt smaller, but it rather does make His grace greater.

Paul did not speak about ‘runaway’, but about being “separated”. That separation was “for a while”, but the return is eternal. The master-slave relationship is a temporary one. In that relationship Onesimus returns, but a new relation has been added, that of brother. And there comes no end to a brother-brother relationship; that remains forever and ever. This relationship is not something you could claim as a right, it is grace. Onesimus is above all a beloved brother to Paul. To Philemon he is both slave, that he is “in the flesh”, and brother, that he is “in the Lord”.

V17. Based on that new and eternal relationship, grounded by grace, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as if Paul himself stands before him. He addresses Philemon as “a partner”. But notice that he calls himself a partner of Philemon and not the other way around. By saying it like this he therefore takes the humblest position and he considers Philemon more excellent than himself.

That is the action of love and grace. This is really hard to learn. Do you find it easy to give another person honor for a work that you have done for the greater part? Yet this is the way to fill hearts with the mind of the Lord Jesus.

V18-19. Paul surely has that mind. That definitely becomes obvious when he says to Philemon that he can charge everything that Onesimus was indebted to him, to his account. Apparently Onesimus had stolen some

things when he ran away or did something that might have made his master angry. Paul does everything in his power to calm Philemon down. The best thing he can do is to take all the blame. What has been stolen is to be given or paid back. Paul is therefore willing to stand bail. He takes the whole responsibility for the debts. He will pay everything back.

Don't you see the mind of the Lord Jesus here, Who perfectly took the blame of the other, of you, on Himself? Also the evil that may have been done to you was borne by Christ. He has said: 'I will repay.' The Lord has written that with his own hand. I can imagine that Philemon, while reading this, thought of that. In that way Paul did not focus the thoughts on himself but on the Lord Jesus.

If you focus yourself on Him you will always find the right motive for all your actions (1Jn 3:16). Only by looking upon Christ you will, if a brother has done injustice to you, react in the right way. A person is never a loser if he accepts any abuse for the sake of the Lord.

But there is another thing. In the case of Paul and Philemon you may also speak of a settlement of debts. Philemon owes Paul more than the other way around. Philemon owes Paul. He also came to faith due to the service of Paul and therefore Paul is his spiritual father. Besides that Onesimus is his brother now, Onesimus also has the same spiritual father as Philemon. Would not that also have a beneficial impact on his attitude toward Onesimus?

V20. By saying "yes, brother" Paul expresses himself positively about what he expects of Philemon. Love hopes all things (1Cor 13:7). Again Paul calls Philemon 'brother' and again he does that in connection with the refreshment that Philemon gives (verse 7). He expects to benefit from Philemon. Do you also look in faith at your brothers and sisters like that?

Needless to say that this has got nothing to do with the misuse of the kindness of others by some people. The benefit that Paul seeks lies in the attitude of Philemon. The refreshment of his heart may be that Philemon receives Onesimus in grace as he himself was received by God in grace. Paul seeks nothing for his own sake. Everything he seeks is in Christ.

V21. Paul has written his letter with the confidence that Philemon will receive Onesimus. He even expects Philemon to release Onesimus. He

speaks about that in veiled terms – “do even more than what I say” –, but clearly enough to those who understand the language of love. It could just possibly be the case that Philemon gives Onesimus the room to use his gift for the service of the church. That would imply that Philemon will not keep him for himself and for domestic duties.

V22. After having written so extensively on the preparation of the return of Onesimus, he still adds some lines with a request for his own sake. He asks Philemon to arrange accommodation for himself. That means that he will soon be released from prison.

For that release he does not count on the kindness of Caesar, but on the prayers of brothers and sisters. He sees his whole life in connection with the Lord and his brothers and sisters. This request for accommodation, which includes the soon coming of Paul, will also be another stimulation for Philemon to meet Paul’s request regarding Onesimus.

V23. He concludes his letter by conveying the greetings of some brothers. Those are the same brothers who are also mentioned in the letter to the Colossians (Col 1:7; 4:12). Of Epaphras you read something here that is not mentioned in the letter to the Colossians. In this letter, which says so much about the feelings of a servant, Paul also finds consolation in Epaphras as a fellow sufferer. Knowing that someone is going through the same as you, can be encouraging and give strength to persevere (cf. 1Pet 5:9).

V24. Then Paul mentions four names of people of whom he says that they are “fellow workers”. Mark is the man for whom the life in the service of the Lord has become tough, but who is now useful again (Acts 13:13; 15:37-38; Col 4:10). Aristarchus has been a journey companion of Paul with whom he had gone through turbulent times (Acts 19:29). Demas is still a member of the company here, but he will quit later (2Tim 4:10). In that way he is the counterpart of Mark. Encouragement and disappointment often lie close to each other. Finally he mentions Luke, the medical doctor. He must have gratefully made use of him for his physical condition.

V25. His personal greeting is not addressed to Philemon alone, but to all. The word “your” is in plural. He wishes that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with the spirit of all.

How important is that wish nowadays. Your spirit is daily exposed to countless impressions. Your mind is being influenced by everything you see and hear. It is certainly important to keep your spirit pure. The grace of the Lord Jesus wants to lead you to cleanse yourself “from all defilement of flesh and spirit” (2Cor 7:1). Then you will be free in your spirit and able to learn to know the Lord Jesus better. You will be more able to understand His Word and to do His will. His mind will be revealed more in you; is that not the main theme of this letter?

Now read Philemon 1:11-25 again.

Reflection: How can you refresh someone’s heart in Christ?

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