

Paul's Letter to Philemon

(Part Four -- Appeal)

Paul sent the runaway slave Onesimus, now a Christian, back to his master Philemon. Paul asked for him to be freed, to return to assist Paul. Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, 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—I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 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. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, 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.

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; 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). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say (8-21).

There are many things we didn't have time to stop and appreciate during our first look at this passage.

An Appeal, not an Order

Paul was not commanding a person to, say, avoid fornication—a command he certainly would be very comfortable giving in light of the word of God. Rather, he was asking Philemon to give up the value of property. Such gifts can never be compelled. “Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

Though Paul had great confidence in Philemon's virtuous character and good disposition toward him, he did not presumptuously assume that he would give up Onesimus. In fact, Paul signed in his own hand a promise to repay any debts or damages Onesimus incurred—and he meant it.

It can strain the relationship between brethren when one assumes the other is planning to be generous. It's a beautiful when a family offers to pay for the preacher to eat out; it's a whole different thing when the preacher doesn't bring his wallet because he assumes someone will pick up his bill! Even if the bill gets paid in both scenarios, the first is a joyful delight for all

involved, while the second leads to a very negative impression and rumblings for the preacher's dismissal.

Similarly, it would be a terrible abuse of a brotherly relationship for someone to begin hinting, "I need someone to mow my lawn ... don't forget that I'm the one who baptized you three years ago!" By all means, let brethren count on one another for help, but let's be careful that we don't assume such help is automatic, and thereby cause hurt feelings.

God's Providence

Paul wonders aloud whether God guided events so that Onesimus would encounter the apostle Paul in his Roman imprisonment, so that he could hear the truth. After all, this is how God brought Esther to the king's palace to defend the Jews (Est. 4:14); and how He brought Joseph to Potiphar's house to save the nation of Israel (Gen. 50:20). It's hard to say for sure about such things, when God works in the historical affairs of mankind. The best we can say is, "perhaps..." But we suspect God's hand is involved (Rom. 8:28)!

Paul hoped that Philemon could appreciate the eternal outcome of his own temporary inconvenience. What a blessing to think that God can take our sinful actions and, without approving of them, use them to place us in a position where we can learn the truth and become saved! Surely this would help Philemon be forgiving.

Changed Relationships in Christ

Though Paul was an aged prisoner, the word of Christ was not shackled, not as long as he had opportunities to preach! Paul was always happy when his difficult circumstances would "turn out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12).

Consider all the changed relationships that occur in this brief letter, the same changed relationships that happen anytime a sinner is converted to Christ.

Stranger to Son. Onesimus began his journey a stranger to Paul, but through his teaching of the gospel, he ended it as Paul's son, so to speak. Paul calls him, "my child whom I have begotten in the faith." While Jesus wants us to be careful not to replace God with any human father (Matt. 23:9), it is accurate to think of a teacher of the gospel having a child in the faith. It means that he has labored to instruct him and bring him up in the knowledge of the Lord. His efforts have resulted in an affectionate and holy relationship (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14, Gal. 4:19, Phil. 2:22, 1 Tim. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, 2:1, Tit. 1:4).

Slave to Brother. Onesimus began his journey a lowly slave, but he ended it by returning home a brother in Christ on equal spiritual footing. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). It's amazing to appreciate how the social barriers that remain standing throughout history, despite decades of redistributionary policies and laws, are smashed down in Christ. What the world can never accomplish, the gospel can accomplish instantly!

Taker to Helper. Onesimus began his journey by defrauding Philemon, but he ended it a fellow

worker in the same gospel, looking toward the promise of the same heaven. He wished to devote his life to helping Paul spread the gospel. In fact, there is a word-play in verse 11. The name Onesimus means “useful.” While he may have been good at mopping floors or washing dishes, such things are meaningless in comparison to his great usefulness as a man of God working hard on behalf of the gospel. In the gospel he became truly useful!

Paul finishes the letter with a request for Philemon’s prayers, the hope to see him soon in person, and kind greetings from his fellow workers. At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (22-25).

I hope that you have enjoyed examining this little letter as much as I have! - John Guzzetta