

Philemon
May, 10, 2009
Forgiveness and Encouragement

I. How are Forgiveness and Encouragement Interrelated?

- When is a Christian expected to forgive?
- When is a Christian expected to encourage?

II. Introduction

Philemon 1-3

1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

NIV

While both Paul and Timothy are listed as co-authors of this letter, Paul is the clearly the primary author, especially given that most of it is written in first person singular.

Paul was in prison at the time of the writing of this book. Many believe that the book was written while Paul was under house arrest referenced in Acts 28:30-31 about 60 AD in Rome. The other prison epistles are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Philemon lived in Colossae.

The Colossian church was likely founded as a mission from Ephesus. Paul was not the founder (Col. 1:7), and there is no record of him ever having visited the city. Philemon's conversion was apparently a result of Paul's ministry, either directly...perhaps Philemon visited Ephesus...or maybe someone who Paul had converted had converted Philemon. Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave, and the focus of the book.

Philemon has much in common with Colossians, including:

1. Written from same place, perhaps Rome
2. Addressed to the same church (actually Philemon is more of a personal note but also addressed to a church in the city)
3. Onesimus mentioned in both
4. Similar list of personal greetings
5. Timothy is listed as a co-author

Verse 1:

- Even though Paul is imprisoned by the Romans, his true confides are in Christ.
- "Dear" is *agapetos* or beloved.
- Paul refers to Philemon as his "brother" throughout this book, signifying equality as Christians between them. "Fellow worker" has the same connotation.

Verse 2:

- Apphia might be Philemon's wife, but this cannot be fully determined from the text. Likewise, Archippus might be the son of Apphia and Philmon. The "house church"

comment adds to these possibilities. Col. 4:17 tells that Archippus should complete the work in the Lord that he has started.

III. Thanksgiving and Prayer

Philem 4-7

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

NIV

Why does Paul start this letter with a prayer? Paul usually starts his letters with prayer (all but Galatians) concerning the receiving church, such as 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Verse 4:

-Note the personal “I” even though verse 1 says that it is from both Paul and Timothy.

Verse 5:

- In the Greek, “love” is mentioned first before “faith.” Both terms are mentioned before the “Lord Jesus” and “all the saints.”

- Faith and love are prerequisites for the embodiment of Christian behavior to emerge.

Verse 6:

-Verse 6 is difficult to translate, and the NIV does a poor job of it. The sense of the verse is that Christians must act out their faith with other Christians before a full understanding of that faith comes. The NIV emphasis on evangelism is not in the Greek. The sharing of faith is with other Christians.

Verse 7:

- What does it mean to refresh the “hearts of other Christians”? How do you refresh others? Notice the impact on Paul and on other Christians of Philemon’s love.

- Strangely, “hearts” is really the bowels or intestines. In those times, bowels were considered the emotional center of the being. Today, we consider it to be the heart, even though biologically this cannot be the case.

IV. Paul’s Appeal (NOTE: Verses 8-14 is one long sentence in Greek)

Philem 8-14

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul-an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus- 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him-who is my very heart-back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

NIV

Verse 8:

-Notice how politely Paul approaches Philemon. Paul’s authority is not fully identified. It might have been his role as apostle, as the leader of the all the churches in western Asia Minor, or because he knows that it is God’s will.

Verse 10:

-Finally, after a long preamble, Paul makes his request.

-At first glance, it is not clear but that Paul is asking for Onesimus to stay and help him. Actually, Paul does not really clarify his request concerning Onesimus. The tone of the entire letter would suggest that Paul wanted Onesimus to return as a slave to Philemon without punishment. Basically, Paul's appeal is that Philemon should treat Onesimus in a Christian way, forgiving him.

-Note the mention of Onesimus in Col 4:7-9:

7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. **8** I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. **9** He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

NIV

Verse 11:

-Since Onesimus literally means "useful," we see a play on the meaning of his name in this verse. After Onesimus ran away (and perhaps even before), he was useless to Philemon. He is already useful to Paul and through Paul's work in the gospel to Philemon. He has become useful to Paul and can again become useful to Philemon. This verse emphasizes a change in the life of Onesimus.

Verse 13:

-Again, Paul would like to keep Onesimus with him to help him while he is in prison. Apparently, Philemon is helping Paul somehow. This is consistent with Paul calling him a "fellow worker" in Verse 1. There is also a hint of a debt in verse 19, although that probably refers to spiritual debt.

Verse 14:

-"Consent" is the same word translated as "good thing" in verse 6 above, probably has the sense of good deed.

V. Better Now, Than Before

Philem 15-16

15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- **16** no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

NIV

Paul is pointing out that some good can come from this relatively bad situation. How does God work His ways in a fallen world? See Gen. 50:20:

20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

NIV

VI. Final Appeals

Philem 17-21

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18** If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. **19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back-not to mention that you owe me your very self. **20** I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

The following are the arguments, somewhat overlapping, that Paul offers on behalf of Onesimus:

1. Philemon's Christian character (4-7)
2. Paul's position as an apostle and prisoner (8-9)
3. On the basis of love (9)
4. Onesimus' newly found faith (10-13)
5. Onesimus' value (13-16)
6. Principle of voluntarism (14)
7. Christian providence and brotherhood (15-16)
8. Paul's relationship to Philemon (17)
9. Paul will personally pay Onesimus' debt (18)
10. Philemon's debt to Paul (19, perhaps mentioned above)
11. Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon have common goals (throughout)

Verse 17:

- Partner is a translation of a word related to *koinonia*.

Verse 18:

- By running away, Onesimus has clearly wronged Philemon and deprived him monetarily. Paul is willing to pay this back to Philemon. Onesimus might have stolen money when he ran away; he would have needed some for his travels.
- In a sense, Paul is being Christ-like by being willing to pay for Onesimus' wrong.

After reading through verse 21, what would you say to Paul if you were Philemon?

An Onesimus became the bishop at Ephesus in the course of time. It might have been our Onesimus, or perhaps another slave called Onesimus... "useful" was a common slave name. History does not record a reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus, but it is hard to imagine this little book being in the NT if the result had not been godly.

VII. Final Comments

Philemon 22-25

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

NIV

While history does not record that Paul visited Philemon (or Colossae), he might have done so. Some see Paul checking up on Philemon in verse 22, but more likely it is an afterthought in follow-up to invitations based on the Colossians saying that they were praying for Paul to get out of prison and come visit them.

Paul begins and ends the letter with comments on grace.

VIII. Why do you think that God included this book in the NT? Why did Paul write this letter...simply for the sake of Onesimus?