



## The Epistle to Philemon

Philemon is an unusual letter in the Pauline corpus as it survives to us. It is the only undisputed Pauline letter (i.e. it is generally agreed not to be pseudonymous) addressed to individuals rather than to a church. It begins by addressing three people: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Paul refers to the church that meets in Archippus' house, which suggests that Archippus and Apphia are community leaders, and this is probably why he addresses them, but it soon becomes clear that the letter is really addressed to Philemon.

### Character of the Letter

The letter is a short business letter with just one theme, and with none of the reflection on the cross or the end time, the interest in how the community is getting on, or the ethical teaching, which are so important in Paul's other letters. Interestingly, though this is unusual among Paul's letters, it is typical of business letters in general from the ancient world. It is quite likely that Paul wrote many letters of this kind, of which this is the only survivor. Why this letter does survive is something of a mystery, but some scholars have suggested that the subject of it, the slave Onesimus, may himself have preserved it.

Paul does not tell us where Philemon lives, but the Letter to the Colossians also mentions an Onesimus, so Philemon may be living at Colossae, a city in southern Anatolia (south-west modern Turkey). Paul describes himself as "a prisoner for Christ Jesus" (vv. 1, 9). Paul was apparently imprisoned more than once, but his most likely location at this point is thought to be Rome, which dates this letter to the early 60s.

### The Issue with Onesimus

Paul never describes the context of the letter explicitly, but we can infer a good deal from what he says. The letter concerns a slave called Onesimus, who belongs to Philemon (vv.

11–12). Paul says that “if [Onesimus] has done you any injustice or owes you anything, charge it to me” (v. 18). Commentators have suggested that Onesimus stole something from Philemon and ran away. Later, Onesimus encountered Paul, who became his “father” (v. 10). Whether Onesimus knew Paul from Paul’s mission in Colossae, and perhaps had been converted as a member of Philemon’s household, or whether Onesimus was converted by Paul during his imprisonment, we do not know, but Paul affirms that Onesimus has become useful to him in prison, in unspecified ways (v. 11). However, Paul knows that a slave who is away from his master, apparently without permission, should be sent back, so he sends Onesimus to Philemon, presumably bearing this letter. Paul asks Philemon to treat Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more to you, as a man and in the Lord” (vv. 16–17). He knows that he has no right to intervene between a master and his slave – but he does regard himself, as apostle to Philemon’s community, as having “the full right in Christ to order you to do what is proper” (v. 8).

Paul says that he is not going to tell Philemon what to do, but he is clearly leaning on him to do what Paul regards as the right thing: “I urge you out of love ... on behalf of my child Onesimus ... [who is] my own heart ... I should have liked to retain him for myself ... but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary....” (vv. 9, 10, 12, 13, 14) But what is the right thing here? Is Paul asking Philemon not to punish Onesimus as he has the legal right to do? Or is he asking more – that Onesimus should be freed, either because he has become a Christian or because he has become beloved to Paul? We cannot tell, and we do not know the end of the story.

### Paul and Slavery

We do know a little more about Paul’s attitude towards slavery from other letters. At Galatians 3:28, Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is clear that he does not mean here that distinctions between men and women, or any other groups, should be abolished for practical purposes, but that everyone can put their trust in Jesus Christ and be saved. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is advising the Corinthians on how to live as they wait for the coming of the Lord. He emphasizes that it does not matter for salvation what your state of life

is. Whether you are unmarried, married, or widowed, slave or free, circumcised or not, there is no need to change your status: the important thing is that you focus on preparing for the end time. On the other hand, if you have the opportunity to become free, or want to get married, then that is also fine (7:21). These passages do not suggest that Paul has any problem with slavery in itself, and that may indicate that he is not likely to be asking Philemon to free Onesimus but is more likely to be asking him to forgive him his transgressions.

Paul's attitude to slavery is profoundly difficult for modern Christians, to whom slavery is an absolute evil. It is one of the things that shame Christianity that it was not until the late eighteenth century that Christians began seriously to question slavery or work for its abolition. Even when arguments against slavery began to be made, they did not come first from the established churches. Abolition's roots are complex, but they include enlightenment philosophy, which argued that human beings are born free and equal; the political revolutions, especially in France and America, which built on enlightenment ideas; the industrial revolution and other economic developments of the eighteenth century which generated industries and businesses which did not need slave labor; and the arguments and political action of slaves and ex-slaves themselves. Only gradually did some Christians come to see working for abolition as an expression of their faith; many of the earliest to do so were Quakers.

We cannot exonerate Paul, any more than we can exonerate later Christians, for his acceptance of slavery. But we can seek to understand his attitude in his world. There were very different kinds of slave life in antiquity. Everyone recognized that working in mines or quarries, rowing ships, fighting as a gladiator, or even working on big agricultural estates, were terrible forms of existence – though no-one in antiquity tried to abolish them. Being a slave in a household would have been very different, and easier, and potentially more secure than being a free poor farmer or craftsman. Household slaves worked alongside as well as for their mistresses and masters. They were vulnerable to physical and sexual violence – as were free women and children – but they were fed and clothed and regarded as part of the family, and, in Roman households, could have families of their own. Some slaves were highly skilled doctors, accountants, secretaries, teachers, textile workers, or business people, respected, paid for their work, and able to earn their freedom. It was common, for example, for a slave to work

alongside his master or mistress, running a business. Often such slaves were freed in their owner's lifetime or in their will, and sometimes they inherited the business. The early Roman empire, moreover, was a time of unusual social mobility. Freed slaves automatically became Roman citizens, though they could not hold office, and their children had all the rights and privileges of free-born citizens. For skilled and educated, or other household slaves, therefore, there were well trodden routes to freedom, civil rights, and economic security. When we consider Paul's attitude to slavery, though we cannot in any way accept or condone it, we can also bear in mind that the slaves his own family probably kept, and those he would have encountered in his travels to other cities, will have been household and skilled slaves, and that may have informed his thinking when he tells community members not to worry about being unfree (1 Cor 7:21).