

James Philip Bible Readings

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1) I

Someone has called this epistle 'a veritable little masterpiece in the art of letter-writing', and another 'an inspired model of private Christian correspondence' while a third commentator says of it, "A few friendly lines, so full of grace and wit, of earnest and trustful affection, that this short epistle shines among the rich treasures of the New Testament as a pearl of exquisite fineness". It was written by Paul to Philemon concerning and on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave from the latter's house in Colosse, who had been converted to Christ in Rome through the Apostle's ministry there.

Paul calls himself 'a prisoner of Jesus Christ'. He was due to stand trial before the Roman emperor, but it is clear from the tone of the letter and its contents that his spirit was not bound, but free. He calls Philemon his fellow-labourer, thus by implication recognising that he himself was still engaged in the work of the Lord, even though he was a prisoner. Indeed his captivity seems to have had little effect on his continuing fruitfulness as an evangelist. There is a great thrill in trying to reconstruct the circumstances that providentially led the runaway slave to Paul's hired house (see Acts 28:30) where he was brought to a knowledge of Christ's saving power, but this is no more than happens in the lives of those who are vitally in touch with God. Adverse circumstances are no barrier to fruitful witness, and if imprisonment keeps us from men, God will bring them to us, and even jailors are not proof against the power that worketh in us (see Acts 16:30)!

2) 1:1-2

The spirit of love and forgiveness that breathes through this epistle should not be taken for granted, nor should it be assumed that it was the matter-of-course reaction and response to the circumstances involving a slave's absconding with his master's money and valuables. A.M. Hunter quotes another letter written about A.D.298, by one Aurelius Sarapammon to his friend, which shows a very different attitude in a similar situation: "I commission you by this writ to journey to the famous city of Alexandria, and search for my slave....about 35 years of age, known to you. When you have found him you shall place him in custody, with authority to shut him up and whip him, and to lay a complaint before the proper authorities against any persons who have harboured him, with a demand for satisfaction". It is said that under contemporary law almost limitless vengeance could be wreaked on Onesimus by his owner, and that frightful penalties also awaited those who harboured the runaways. There is no doubt that the above-quoted fragment reflects this as being the usual attitude, and the contrast to Philemon is all the more marked, for we cannot but believe that, since this epistle was preserved by Philemon and has been handed down to us, Paul's request must have been complied with. This in itself is evidence of the profound influence that the Christian faith was destined to have on the whole ethical system of the ancient world, not least on the institution of slavery, about which we shall require, in this connection, to say something in the next note.

3) 1:1-2

One striking fact stands out in the New Testament: it is that slavery as an institution is nowhere attacked or condemned, but rather frankly condoned and accepted without question. This has troubled thinking people more than a little, but it is wide of the mark to infer, as some do, that Paul had a blind spot in this matter, and that he did not understand the social implications of the gospel he preached, in condoning slavery. This is to miss something of the profoundest and most far-reaching significance, namely the principle of what may be called indirect influence. The fact is that when the spirit that pervades this lovely epistle spread throughout the world, slavery became morally impossible, and its power was broken precisely because men like Philemon, who owned slaves, were wrought upon by the Spirit of God at work in the gospel, and made finally to see that slavery was indefensible as an institution, and incompatible with the Christian doctrine of the dignity and sanctity of human personality. This principle is in line with our Lord's own teaching in the parable of the leaven; it is as if He (and Paul) were saying, "Let the Christian Spirit loose in the world, and its indirect influence will finally undermine evil institutions and destroy them". If this be so, then it would seem that the greatest contribution the Church can make to burning 'this-worldly' issues in any generation is not so much by direct intervention as by indirect influence, by being the Church, and seeing that its vital testimony creates an atmosphere in society which will lay a restraint on all evil things, and make the continuance of some of them impossible. Church history teaches us that when the Church has been spiritually strong and vital, this in fact has happened. We are suffering from the lack of this kind of influence today.

4) 1:1-2

Apphia was the wife of Philemon and Archippus may possibly have been their son, and perhaps one of the leaders of the fellowship in Colosse at that time. The reference to the Church in their house is full of interest and reminds us that in the early Church worship in congregational buildings was unknown. When hearts were opened to the gospel, homes were opened too, and made available as places of worship for the saints. This is not to say that we today should revert to meeting in one another's houses instead of in a larger public building - this would be a legalistic interpretation of Scripture out of keeping with its spiritual meaning - but it does contain an important lesson for us all the same, in that it points the way to a very fruitful avenue of service for the gospel. The very size and unwieldiness of most congregations nowadays makes it almost inevitable that some individuals will feel 'out of it', and find it difficult to get to know many fellow-members. Those who have comfortable homes could do a very great deal in this direction, by inviting such people home with them for supper after a service, thus helping them to feel 'at home' in the fellowship. It is one thing to entertain one's friends, but this can often be a purely self-regarding exercise bearing little relation to the kind of Christian stewardship of our homes that Christ expects of us. Those who have made a conscience of putting their homes at the Lord's disposal for His work's sake have found just how richly rewarding a ministry opens up for them. Beyond any doubt there is a great need for such activity in most congregations, and a harvest of usefulness awaits every sacrifice of domestic privacy and quietness for the sake of others who need to share the comfort and relaxation of our firesides.

5) **1:1-3**

In our reading of the New Testament epistles we become so accustomed to the characteristic apostolic greeting (3) that we tend to miss its significance. This is not merely a form of words with Paul: nor have we exhausted its meaning when we recognise, as we do, that 'grace is the love of God, spontaneous, beautiful, unearned, at work in Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinful men; peace is the effect and fruit in man of the reception of grace' (J. Denney). Paul is not stating a fact, but praying a prayer when he uses these words, and what we are meant to realise is that grace and peace are conveyed to those who read his words. We need not doubt that it was a blessing for Philemon and Apphia to receive the Apostle's letter - all the evidences go to show that it was, for did it not accomplish its purpose? And should we not doubt that the same grace and peace are meant to be ours in reading it also. This is the mystery and the comfort of the Scriptures, that in reading and studying them we are blessed, because God meets with us in them and through them. This is the implication of the apostolic greeting here and elsewhere in the New Testament; it is openly stated in Rev 1:3 where John says, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy...." The issue is simple: Do you want a blessing? Then read the Scriptures, search them diligently, for God will meet with you there.

6) **1:4-6**

Paul's prayer for Philemon should be compared with similar prayers in other epistles (cf Eph 1:17, Phil 1:9, Col 1: 9). The AV rendering of 6 reads rather complicatedly, and alternative translations may be helpful for a better understanding of the Apostle's words. The NEB has "My prayer is that your fellowship with us in our common faith may deepen the understanding of all the blessings our union with Christ brings us", while the RSV renders it, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ". This latter gives much the same sense as the NEB, provided we take the 'understanding' in the NEB rendering as referring to other people's understanding of the blessings we have in Christ. On this interpretation, then, what Paul is praying for in Philemon is that his light may so shine before men that they may see his good works and glorify the Father which is in heaven. Calvin puts it thus: "What therefore did he (Paul) desire for Philemon? That his faith, expressing itself by good fruits, might be shown to be true and not vain. For he calls that the communication of his faith when it does not remain inoperative within, but bears itself forth to benefit men by its proper effects. For although faith has its proper seat in the heart, yet it communicates itself to men by good works." Faith, then, is something to be shared, and it is shared aright when something of the wonder and blessedness of the Christian experience is conveyed to others by the quality of our life and testimony.

7) 1:7

Here is a wonderful testimony to the reality of Philemon's faith. "Through you, my brother, God's people have been much refreshed" (NEB). We need not doubt that this refreshment came to the saints through the ministry of his open home (page 5, 1:1-2) and this serves to underline the enormous potential for good a consecrated home can be in the work of the gospel. It must have been an incalculable blessing for hard-pressed believers in Colosse to be able to go to Philemon's, and find there love and understanding in their needs, and strength and encouragement to face the continuing hazards and challenges of Christian life in an alien environment. When Christians falter and fall back, it is often because they have not had such opportunities for finding encouragement and refreshment of spirit, as Paul must have known well. It was the news that Philemon has turned out to be such a tower of strength to the saints that had brought such joy and delight to the Apostle's heart. Nothing could be more calculated to move him than the realisation that grace had done such a thorough work in Philemon's heart. "Now we live", he had said to the Thessalonians, "If ye stand fast in the Lord" (1 Thess 3:8), and the thought here is similar to that. Infinitely worthwhile his imprisonment and travail for Christ's sake and the gospel's and infinitely worthwhile any cost our witness entails, if only it produces this kind of fruit in those we lead to Christ!

8) **1:8-10**

Paul bases his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus on his known Christian love and generosity of heart. It is as if the Apostle were exhorting him, as Oesterley puts it, to 'keep up his reputation for kindly dealing'. This is the force of the 'wherefore' in 8. He might well, as he points out, have relied on the undoubted apostolic authority that was his, and made bold to tell Philemon what his Christian duty was in the matter, but he did not, preferring to trust the even greater moral constraint of love to do all that was necessary. The phrase 'Paul the aged' has been translated in the NEB (through a variant reading in another manuscript) as 'Paul the Ambassador', and if this is accurate, it reminds us of the Apostle's words in 2 Cor 5:20 where, as ambassadors for Christ he and his colleagues beseeched them to be reconciled to God. Denney comments, "The ambassador, as a rule, stands upon his dignity; he maintains the greatness of the person whom he represents. But Paul in this lowly passionate entreaty is not false to his Master; he is preaching the gospel in the spirit of the gospel; he shows that he has really learned of Christ; the very conception of the ambassador descending to entreaty is, as Calvin says, "an incomparable commendation of the grace of Christ". It is undoubtedly this spirit that pervades Paul's appeal to Philemon, whether or not he is speaking as an ambassador or as 'Paul the aged'. It is certain that Philemon must have been hard-hearted to have been able to resist an appeal made to him on so many grounds, and we may be sure that if there had been any likelihood of Onesimus receiving severe treatment, that possibility would have been dismissed after this letter had been received.

9) 1:10-12

It is pointed out that Paul does not mention Onesimus by name until he describes his conversion - the sentence in the original reads, 'my son, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus', - as if to emphasise that he was no longer the man he used to be, but a new creature, and that this was the most important thing about him now. This is further borne out by the fact that the Apostle seems to be making a play on his name, which literally, in Greek means 'useful'. What Paul says in effect in 11 is, 'useful by name, unprofitable by nature, but now name and (new) nature coincide, as I have already proved, and you are likely to soon'.

The word 'receive' does not appear in the original, and the sentence probably reads better without it. The NEB puts it, 'I am sending him back to you, and in doing so I am sending a part of myself', and this certainly carries the Apostle's meaning. One marvels at the capacity for loving that Paul had, and there is little doubt that this was the great secret of the loyalty and devotion that he commanded among those who knew him. The fact is, he gave himself to people (see 1 Thess 2:8) and this unreserved expenditure of his heart's care and affection, costly as it must undoubtedly have been, reaped rich rewards, and nowhere are they seen more plainly than in the characters delineated in this lovely epistle. It is small wonder that Onesimus was transformed and rehabilitated, encountering such Christ-like love as this. Christianity, as someone has put it, is caring!

10) 1:13-14

The word 'would' in 13 and 14 translates two different words in the Greek, the first meaning Paul's wish in the matter, the second his decision of will. As Lightfoot puts it, "the will stepped in and put an end to the inclinations of the mind". This is a point worth noticing, for it is precisely here that we are tempted to deceive ourselves by rationalising our own desires and convincing ourselves that they are the will of God. It would have been easy for Paul to find several compelling and persuasive reasons why he should keep Onesimus by him, particularly in terms of what he might suppose Philemon himself would have wished ('in thy stead'), but no, Paul would not take such a liberty with him. He respected the sanctity of his personality too much. This also is worth noting. Familiarity, we say, breeds contempt, but the deepest Christian relationships are not based on a wrong kind of familiarity; indeed, the closer the friendship, the greater the basic respect that exists between the friends. It is very significant that it is those who have not as yet 'graduated' to the higher levels of intimate friendship, and show themselves in a variety of ways unfit for it, that tend usually to presume upon the friendship we offer them, and take undue and unwarranted advantage of it. Such have a good deal to learn.

11) 1:15-16

Paul's interpretation of Onesimus's flight is very gracious, and full of delicate suggestion 'was parted' (15) is better than 'departed', and contains the idea perhaps that a higher hand was at work. What he is expressing is the glad and exultant conviction that God turns the wrath of man to praise Him, and makes capital out of sin for His glory. One marvels at the mysterious workings of Providence that ordained that this defection should lead to such a blessed result in the conversion of Onesimus. God is sovereign, and we should learn that even in very great lapses and disasters evil is not allowed to have the last word. What Paul says in 16 bears this out: Onesimus's last state is to be infinitely better than if he had not run away at all, just as the prodigal son (Luke 15) enjoyed greater and richer blessings than ever he had done when he came home from the far country. He was to be, not first a slave now, but first a brother beloved in the Lord. Not that his slave-status was to be altered, for Paul says nothing to suggest this, but that his relationship with his master would be transformed. All the same, as Ellicot puts it, "in these words we have at last the principle which is absolutely destructive of slavery", and it is certain that the spread of this essentially revolutionary concept (see Note for on page 4, 1:1-2) eventually undermined the whole foundation on which slavery was built, and made it finally impossible.

12) 1:17-19a

We may wonder why Paul is at such pains to intercede on behalf of the converted slave. It can scarcely be that he fears that Philemon will react in harshness against him, for all that we know of the man in this epistle would militate against such a possibility. Nor can the reason lie wholly in Paul's evident love for his new son in the faith. It may well be that although Paul had little fear of his acceptance on returning to Philemon's household, Onesimus had, hence the Apostle's desire to reassure him and make his welcome certain. One of the inevitable curses of serfdom and slavery is the low-spiritedness that they produce. A lifetime of slavery creates a servile spirit which finds it very difficult to 'take in' the fact that there might be people in the world prepared to treat a man as a human being in his own right, still more that there might be a God Who cares deeply for them and understands their sorrows and their needs. This is perhaps one of the most touching and pathetic problems involved in the moral and spiritual rehabilitation of those reclaimed from lovelessness and uncaring into the kindness and compassion of God. They find it so difficult to 'believe the love that God hath' to them (1 John 4:16). This, we think, is why Paul was so anxious to have Onesimus received without reserve by Philemon. It is one thing for a man to repent of his sins and turn to Christ, but quite another for him to be rooted and grounded in the love of God, and much will depend on the wise and loving pastoral care exercised towards him in the critical early days of his new life. In this sense, the epistle is as much a pastoral letter as anything else.

13) 1:18-19

As to the question of Onesimus's sin, Paul does not pass it over, even when it has been confessed and forsaken. The matter of restitution is a very real one, and Paul promises himself to pay the debt and make it good to Philemon, appending his own name at this point in the letter as a formal and binding signature. Paul had, by returning the runaway slave to his master, put Philemon in his debt considerably, and had by that act probably repaid much that was due to him. This, however, is not what Paul refers to in 19b; it is Philemon's own conversion that he owed to Paul, and this was a debt that humanly speaking he could never hope to repay. There may be an echo in this verse of one of our Lord's parables (Matt 18:23-35), containing more than a hint to Philemon that, although it was right for Paul to offer to repay the debt, it would be wrong for Philemon to accept it. It is wisest not to stand on our rights overmuch with those to whom we owe an incomparable debt in spiritual things. Nothing they could ever ask of us is ever able to square the account or absolve us from the duty and privilege of obliging them in anything. Evidently the hint was sufficient for Philemon, and the prodigal was received gladly, as the preservation of this epistle for posterity seems to indicate.

14) 1:20-22

The word translated 'let me have joy of thee' in 20 derives from the Greek word meaning 'profit' and is the same in root as that in the name 'Onesimus'. It seems clear that Paul is once again using a play on words. What in effect he is saying to Philemon is, 'May I find thee (as I found him) a true Onesimus - may I have profit of thee as I have had of him, and as you yourself will have from his new life in Christ'. It is interesting to note that Paul speaks in the end of obedience to his wishes (21) - a hint perhaps of the authority he had a right to wield - but it is surely not the obedience given by a sullen spirit afraid to rebel against lawful authority, but the glad outgoing of Philemon's heart to the gracious entreaty the Apostle has made concerning Onesimus. The hymn says, 'Love will make obedience sweet', when we take Christ's easy yoke and wear it, and this is a useful reminder that there are two ways of trying to win obedience from men's hearts. The unspoken desire in 21b must surely refer to Onesimus's being sent back again to Paul, and this is the only real abolition of slavery. As Ellicot comments, "Exactly in this way Christianity was to work out the release of the slave - not by command but by free and natural inference from its emphatic declaration of his true brotherhood in Christ". 22 expresses the Apostle's expectation of a release from his imprisonment in Rome which might enable him to visit churches of Asia and Greece once more (see Phil 2:24), a hope which we believe was realised, as we may gather from the Pastoral Epistles, enabling him to continue his ministry, before being re-arrested, tried and finally executed (see 2 Tim 4:6, 7, 16, 17).

15) 1:23-25

Two names stand out here (see Col 4:10-14) as worthy of particular comment, Mark and Demas. Mark is John Mark, sister's son to Barnabas, the writer of the second Gospel. He it was who defected from Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:13), and was the cause of the sharp friction between Paul and Barnabas at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15:36ff). We may well suppose that he later proved himself worthy of renewed trust in the work of the gospel, for here he is by Paul's side, in his imprisonment in Rome. Indeed, even later, during the Apostle's last earthly days, we find him spoken of as profitable for the ministry (2 Tim 4:11). The word of the Lord came to him, as to Jonah, the second time, and this is a reminder in keeping with the gracious and encouraging tone of the whole epistle to Philemon, that grace can over-rule even serious failure in the Lord's work, and re-instate His servants when they fall from the highest they know. Demas, on the other hand, finally forsook the Apostle (2 Tim 4:10) and his sorrowful declension stands as a solemn warning that yesterday's grace will not suffice for today's need, and it is those that endure to the end that shall be saved. Well might Paul close his epistle with the re-iteration of the prayer he uttered at its beginning (3) - the need is for grace at the outset, grace at the end, and grace all the time between!

16)