

Philemon: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] The Book of Philemon Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother. To Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Apphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.

And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.

[1 : 14] But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you and the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's epistles, and after 3rd and 2nd John, the shortest book in the New Testament.

[2 : 29] Although other theories exist, it was most likely sent to Philemon in Colossae, at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians was sent there by the hand of Tychicus. It is written concerning a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Some in the later tradition have identified Onesimus with a bishop of Ephesus, who was martyred in the reign of Domitian, possibly in the first half of the 90s AD. Slaves were a feature of the ancient world.

When we think of slavery, we tend to think of the race-based chattel slavery of the American antebellum south, which was fundamentally founded upon man-stealing. Slavery in the ancient world was also a vast and brutal institution, Much of Rome's economy depended heavily upon slavery, and hundreds of thousands of slaves were captured in wars in Europe and elsewhere.

Others had been kidnapped by pirates. Some slaves had been rescued from exposure as infants. A few sold themselves into slavery to improve their conditions. Some have estimated that over 30% of Roman society were slaves.

It is important that we recognise the greater complexities of the institution. In many less developed societies, slavery could not easily be wished away. If a person was indebted or displaced, the choice might be between being a slave or suffering an extreme hunger and want.

[3 : 45] Manumission, while an improvement in legal status, would probably not have been a step up in material conditions for many, but would have reduced them to destitution and the terrible indignities and cruelties of poverty in Roman society.

The conditions enjoyed by slaves could vary widely. Harsh and inhumane treatment of slaves was very common. However, in some cases, slaves of wealthy and high-status masters could enjoy influence and even wealth of their own.

Masters provided the food, clothing and shelter that their slaves required. Other slaves could be valued and honoured members of the households that they served. Slaves could be found doing all sorts of jobs in society, with many levels of expertise.

Epictetus, who lived around the same time as Nesimus, became a great Stoic philosopher, for instance. In Galatians chapter 4, Paul compares the condition of the child in his minority to the state of a slave.

The comparison could also work in the other direction. The slave was under the direct and practically absolute authority of another party over their actions, bodies and lives. They could be corporally punished by their masters.

[4 : 49] Their position was one of great vulnerability, and very great many were used for sexual purposes and abused in this and other ways. However, slaves could often enjoy much greater material security and provision than freedmen, who, without a master to provide for their essential needs, were at greater risk of extreme poverty.

In neither the Old nor the New Testament is slavery rejected as illegitimate in principle. This is not, however, to suggest that either testament is ambivalent to the cultural practice.

The Old Testament tells us stories of slaves. Stories of Hagar and Eleazar of Damascus. Slaves of Abraham. The story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph illustrates both the ways that a slave could rise in their household, but also how vulnerable slaves were to oppression and mistreatment.

The story of the children of Israel brutally oppressed by the Egyptians is another story of slavery. However, while oppression is a theme in some of these stories, it is not a universal feature.

Some slaves enjoyed great privileges. Eleazar of Damascus, prior to the births of Ishmael and Isaac, was going to inherit the entirety of Abraham's household. We also see in Abraham sending his servant to find a bride for Isaac, that that servant clearly enjoys great authority to act in Abraham's name and to manage his affairs.

[6 : 07] The Egyptians were saved from starvation in the famine through giving themselves over to slavery to Pharaoh. Some slaves loved their masters, desired to remain in their masters' households for life, and performed a right to bind themselves to their masters.

There were forms of slavery designed to allow poor women to marry into richer families. The law reminds Israel of their own experience of slavery in Egypt, and while permitting them to own slaves, is concerned that the slaves are treated with justice and equity.

Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 12 to 18 is an example of Old Testament teaching concerning slavery. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.

When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore I command you this today. But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever.

[7 : 24] And to your female slave you shall do the same. It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

Treating slaves well was not really a matter of expediency in the law, expecting to get more work out of them. It was a matter of basic morality secured by the Lord as the patron of slaves, and backed up by the rationale of Israel's own recollection of the experience of oppressive servitude.

The New Testament continues in this same vein. Slavery is not directly condemned as an institution, but its cultural logic is radically undermined, and replaced with a Christian logic that does not dispense with the form, but utterly changes its principles of operation.

Colossians chapter 3 verses 22 to chapter 4 verse 1. Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service as people please, but with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ, for the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

[8 : 38] Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven. And in Ephesians chapter 6 verses 5 to 9. Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by way of eye service as people please, but as bondservants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

Masters do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him. In Paul's teaching then, servants were encouraged either to act toward their earthly masters as those living out of a more fundamental state of servanthood, to a gracious, loving and good master, or to think of themselves as sons in relationship to Christ, acting obediently toward their earthly masters for his sake.

Masters were to see themselves as slaves of a higher master, having this in common with their servants and being accountable for their treatment of them. God is impartial, and unlike Roman courts, will not favour the unjust master over his abused servant.

God is the patron and the protector of the weak. Even more importantly, Christ himself came in the form of a servant, and the pattern of Christian ethics is set by a master who willingly assumed the path of service.

The New Testament is not an egalitarian document. It assumes and sometimes justifies a hierarchical order in society, with rulers, parents, husbands and masters occupying places over others, places which are not delegitimised.

[10 : 19] Perhaps more challenging to us, nowhere does the scripture suggest that a person's soul is in jeopardy by virtue of possessing a slave. This is not because the scriptures are hesitant in calling out sin.

However, nor is the scripture simply a book legitimating and supporting the status quo. Slavery, while not delegitimised, is neither idealised nor meekly tolerated.

The scripture frequently speaks into the institution to transform its operations, on the basis of God's concern for the slave, and the human kinship of the master and the slave, a kinship to which the scripture constantly alerts us.

This transformation is not undertaken for the purpose of rehabilitating the institution though, as if slavery just needed a bit more spit and polish. Rather, throughout the scripture the movement is towards release from slavery, and into the independence, maturity and providence that slavery stifles, and for whose lack it could often substitute.

While our society may commit itself to equality in principle, it often struggles in practice, as people clearly are not equal in their talents, abilities, capacities, their economic standing, their social and family backgrounds, the authority that they enjoy, and any number of other criteria.

[11 : 33] While we talk about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome for instance, we can try to realise equality in ways that set us up for constant frustration, as while there are areas where fairness must clearly be displayed, the natural differences between people will constantly produce diverging outcomes, and any attempt to level these outcomes will tend unfairly to stifle people in the expression of their gifts.

Indeed, many of these attempts at equality can produce harsher situations, such as where the supposed justice of meritocracy leads to the justification of the much greater wealth or status of some being perceived as a natural right that they enjoy, when formerly it might have been attributed to the grace of God or unmerited fortune.

Such equality of opportunity may serve only to underline our great natural differences. Part of the power of the teaching that we find in Paul and in the rest of the New Testament then, is the way that it speaks the levelling reality of the gospel into situations where social hierarchies are taken for granted, are not expected to disappear, and in some cases are even affirmed.

The gospel does not abolish slavery, but it makes it impossible ever to think about it or practice it in the same way again, and, as many have observed, thereby sows the seed for the progressive social delegitimation and the later abolition of the institution.

The gospel focuses its vision of equality beneath the surface of the social order. In the process, it denies the social order finality, and insists that it be approached and regarded in terms of a more fundamental and determinative reality, given by virtue of the facts of human creation and redemption.

[13 : 15] Every human being is beyond exchange value, and is of incalculable worth in the sight of God. Whoever someone is, wherever they stand in the social order, this is true of them.

In the life of the church, in particular in the light of redemption, this fact is brought into fuller expression. For an institution like slavery, characterised by the negation of the personhood of others, and their reduction to mere possession, a true recognition of this fact would over time prove fatal.

And now we are in a better position to appreciate the power of Paul's argument in Philemon, which is shot through with the logic of the gospel. Onesimus, fleeing from Philemon, came to Paul, and apparently was converted through Paul's message.

Paul sends him back to Philemon, but sends him back with an appeal. Paul could have commanded Philemon. Philemon arguably owed Paul his spiritual life, and Paul was in a position where he could have laid requirements upon him.

However, by appealing to him, he affords him the opportunity to act in the maturity and the freedom of love. As Paul says, he desires Philemon's goodness not be by compulsion, but of his own accord.

[14 : 22] The gospel more generally is characterised by a rhetoric of appeal, exhortation, and persuasion, rather than direct command. As persons acting in the freedom of the spirit, rather than under the command of the law, we are those who obey from the heart.

And so we appeal to as those who are mature, who are to obey from the heart, and with reasons that have been given to us and internalised. Prior to his escape, Anesimus was not a good servant to Philemon, but since his conversion he has become of great assistance to Paul, and will likewise be of great usefulness to Philemon.

Receiving Anesimus back now, Philemon won't just be receiving a bondservant, but someone beloved, as a now reformed man of his household, but also as a brother in Christ.

Paul encourages Philemon to see God's hand in all of this. Through Anesimus' departure, God has brought it about that Philemon is receiving him back as something much more dear than he ever was when he left.

Verses 15-16 are not, I believe, referring to manumission. Receiving Anesimus back as a brother did not mean that he ceased to be Philemon's slave. However, it would necessarily transform the way that Anesimus and Philemon treated each other from that point onwards.

[15 : 34] As brothers in Christ, and in the new humanity in Christ, also recognising their common dignity as human beings more generally, the master-slave relationship would take on a very different form, when occurring in the light of, and under the rule of, a much more fundamental reality.

And at the heart of Paul's appeal is Paul's use of the work of Christ as a paradigm for his own appeal on Anesimus' behalf. So, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. In the Gospel, Christ, who was in the very form of God, took on the form of a servant, identifying with us, so that we, as we are found in him, might enjoy his riches.

Paul stands between Anesimus and Philemon, assuming all of the burden of Anesimus' debts and wrongs, and offers himself as a guarantor for them. He identifies fully with Anesimus, so that a glorious exchange can occur.

[16 : 45] Paul assumes Anesimus' debts, and Anesimus receives the welcome and the love that Paul himself would receive. All of this rests upon the fellowship that we have in Christ, in which Christ has identified with us, so that we can enjoy his riches.

However, this fellowship between head and body also calls forth a fellowship within the body, whereby we identify with each other, in whatever condition we may find ourselves. Rich must identify with poor, masters with slaves, men with women, rulers with subjects.

All must take concern for the other. Was Paul expecting Anesimus to be released? Perhaps the key consideration here is the cryptic statement in verse 21.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. What is the even more than I say? I am not persuaded that manumission is primarily what Paul has in mind here.

There was nothing wrong in principle in Paul's mind with a Christian owning a slave, or a Christian slave serving a master. However, the gospel necessarily transforms such situations, and provokes godly acts of gracious creativity and imagination.

[17 : 54] Philemon's relationship with Anesimus could not be the same after this, and Paul is certain that Philemon receiving Anesimus back will provoke Philemon to consider ways that his relationship with Anesimus can become richer and more characterised by grace.

One possibility is that he might send Anesimus to Paul, who clearly has found Anesimus to be of great assistance to him in his work, and has a deep affection for him as his son in the gospel.

Anesimus might then have accompanied Paul as he travelled, assisting him in the work of the gospel. The possibility that Anesimus is the bishop of Ephesus mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch invites further speculation.

But whatever happened, the gospel clearly transforms the relationship between slave and master, placing it on a completely different footing, denying it the ultimacy that it enjoyed in pagan society, and placing it firmly under the rule of Christ's grace.

A question to consider. How might Paul's pattern of appeal here be adopted by Christians in our mission to those on the margins of our societies?