

"A BROTHER BELOVED"

"Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee."

Paul's letter to Philemon

Philemon differs from all the rest of the Bible in that it is strictly a private letter on a personal matter written to an individual friend. The only other private letter to an individual in the Bible is John 3, to Gaius, but there the subject and purpose is more general. Timothy and Titus are ecclesial and doctrinal communications.

Philemon was a brother in Colosse converted to the Truth by Paul. Onesimus was a runaway slave belonging to Philemon who made contact with Paul in Rome--perhaps in repentance, perhaps in realization of the danger of his position. Paul says he had previously been unprofitable to Philemon so perhaps he had taken advantage of the kindness of a lenient owner.

In association with Paul he accepted the Truth and was baptized, and then Paul sent him back to make peace with Philemon. This epistle is the letter he carried from Paul to Philemon.

This epistle has been used both to support slavery (in that Paul sent him back) and to condemn it (in that Paul said, "Not now as a slave, but a brother beloved"). Actually it is on a much higher plane than either to specifically approve or condemn one particular aspect of the world of sin. It rises far above it, from temporals to eternal and leaves the question of slavery as such far below as among unimportant, passing earthly things.

The whole spirit is summed up in those words just referred to--"No longer a slave but a brother beloved." To the extent that Philemon comprehended and accepted the fulness of this, to that extent the slavery would cease to exist.

In this brief message there can be discerned, skilfully woven together and either expressed or implied, 14 separate arguments in favor of reconciliation on Philemon's part.

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According to the law of Moses, an escaped slave was not to be returned to his owner, but Paul sends him back under the law of Christ. Is then, the law of Christ less humane, less enlightened, less merciful, more in sympathy with slavery, than the Law of Moses?

On the contrary, Paul's action indicates the very opposite. Moses' Law would release Onesimus from his obligation, or at least it would have released Paul from the obligation of giving up Onesimus to Philemon, but the law of Christ called for a repentance and a seeking of reconciliation, and a giving to Philemon the opportunity of granting freely what had been taken from him against his will.

This epistle is clearly related in time and circumstance to the epistles of Ephesus and Colosse, especially the latter. They are from Rome and sent about the same time--62 AD, near the end of Paul's 2 years imprisonment. Ephesians and Colossians contain several parallel passages and were borne by the same messenger, Tychicus, from the same place.

Philemon and Colossians were both carried by Onesimus and in each the same 6 persons were saluted, (with Colossians bearing an additional salutation from Justus)--

IN PHILEMON:

IN COLOSSIANS:

Epaphras
Marcus
Aristarchus
Demas
Luke
Onesimus

Epaphras
Marcus
Aristarchus
Demas
Luke
Onesimus
Justus

We are not told where Philemon lived, and we would not know from the epistle to him alone, but we learn from Colossians that Archippus, who was of Philemon's household, was of Colosse.

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IN this one personal letter, we see a slightly different Paul. He plays lightly and gently with all the names as if to add informality and intimacy and appeal to the message.

Onesimus means 'profitable,' so Paul speaks of his former unprofitableness but now his profitableness to both Philemon and Paul.

Philemon means 'beloved' from Philema--a kiss--and so Paul addresses him.

Apphia is an affectionate diminutive for 'brother or sister,' and so Paul calls her 'Apphia the sister' (as it should be and as RV gives it, and the best manuscripts).

Archippus means 'Master of the horse'--a military term, so Paul calls him 'fellovsoldier.'

But there is without a doubt far more to 'fellovsoldier' than just a passing play upon a name. Paul often introduces the conception of warfare. It is a very apt and instructive comparison, and to Paul--a prisoner of Jesus Christ and for the sake of the Gospel--a real and ever-present fact.

Life in the Truth IS a warfare. It must be so if we are faithful. All aspects of warfare find their counterpart in the Truth: the call, the sacrifice, the separation and leaving behind of the things of the world, the training and the discipline, the hardship and the self-denial, the singleness of purpose, the armor and the weapons, the unquestioning allegiance and obedience to the supreme commander, the existence of the enemy, the close, smooth, tightly-integrated unity of action so essential to victory, the combat and the danger--not with carnal weapons but with spiritual weapons in implacable hostility to everything carnal and fleshly.

In this one word--fellovsoldier--Paul links Archippus inseparably with himself in all these things, and in the glorious assurance of the final victory. In the Colossians, Paul finds it necessary to gently and publicly remind Archippus of his responsibilities in the Truth (4:17)--"Say to Archippus, take heed to the ministry which thou hast received of the Lord, that thou fulfill it,"

So perhaps, "fellovsoldier" here is also meant to stir Archippus to a clearer remembrance of his partnership with Paul in the glorious Gospel warfare.

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IT is very fitting in itself that Paul's one private letter left for us should be an earnest plea and fervent expression of love and unity for a slave--a class that was then treated as less than human. Paul calls him his son, his brother, and his own heart.

It is probable, in the very nature of things, that slave-owners would be very few among the brethren. The vast majority would be either slaves, or poor free men. The Gospel was preached to the poor, and its principles have the greatest appeal to them.

This epistle enters into the Brotherhood's relation to slavery more than any other part of the New Testament. Paul gives instruction concerning slaves and masters in Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Timothy, but here is an actual example and a whole epistle bearing on the matter.

In the Roman Empire in New Testament times slaves outnumbered the free. Very often the slaves were in chains continually day and night. The master had power of life and death. They had little or no rights or protection of law, no property, no true marriage, no choice of a mate--their master gave or took mates at his will.

The children belonged to the master as slaves for any use or purpose the master desired. Runaway slaves usually received torture, branding, and often a cruel death.

If our version were more consistently translated, this aspect of New Testament times would be more obvious: 3/4 of all the appearances of the word 'servant' in the New Testament should be translated 'slave,' as in some of the more modern versions.

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The Bible has been accused of condoning and even supporting this human evil. This is due to two universal misunderstandings concerning--1. The purpose of the Bible. 2. The deep import of its teaching, fully comprehended.

Through much of history, and almost to the present, slavery has been a major aspect of human society. Actually, it is a much wider and more inclusive thing than generally regarded. That is, all dictatorship is actually slavery; all industrial and economic oppression is actually slavery, especially where the victim's circumstances leave him no choice but to submit.

It has been a universal characteristic of man to seek to oppress and enslave his fellowman and use him to increase his own wealth, power and leisure.

Slavery in its various forms--fiefdom, serfs, peasantry, etc., has been the common lot of the poor up until very recent times, and practical slavery still exists in much of the world today, where the few rich who own all the land exploit and oppress the vast and hopeless multitude of the poor.

Slavery is just one part of the great human fabric of evil and wickedness. For the Bible to seek to abolish slavery would require it to write the laws for all nations, appoint all rulers, and enforce justice by divine power. This would be the Millennium (which will come in God's own proper time).

The greatest slavery of all, before which all else pales into insignificance, is man's slavery to his own selfishness and fleshly desires, and to this all are in bondage. Most, indeed, are eager victims with no desire for freedom. This is the deep root of the weed to which we must lay the axe of Scripture. Chopping off the branches only makes the evil fruit grow bigger.

The Bible's purpose is not to reform the world--yet. Its present purpose is to call out and prepare a people for God. The present evil constitution of man is the necessary furnace of affliction for the purifying of the saints.

The Bible is concerned with the character of the individual, the release from the universal slavery of self and sin, and the preparation for God and eternity.

It tells the slave to serve his master, whether he be good or bad, as service done to God and accepted by God. It tells the master to treat the slave as he himself would desire to be treated, with perfect justice and mercy, even as he hoped in mercy to be treated by his Master--Christ.

The Bible is not out to put odd and futile patches on a thoroughly corrupt and fleshly constitution of things, but to perfect personal relationships and prepare individuals for divinity. The principles of the commands of Christ, spiritually comprehended and faithfully applied, would completely transform and beautify ALL human and social relationships.

Paul in this epistle applies these principles to an actual master-slave relationship. He sends the runaway and disobedient slave back to his master in submission and repentance, and he exhorts the master to accept him, not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ to whom Paul himself was a willing slave and for whom he was even then in actual chains. And he seals the bond of brotherhood between them with his own infinite love for both.

It is notable that Paul's fullest instructions concerning masters and slaves occur in the two epistles which appear to have been written and sent at the same time as this --one to the same place; that is, Colossians and Ephesians.

Similarly at the close of Colossians he calls Epaphras the 'slave of Christ,' the only time he separately applies this term to anyone but himself.

It would seem that he is attempting to soften and dignify the position of the natural slave by reminding the brotherhood of the honor and dignity of their slavery to Christ unto life eternal. He shows how a mark of natural ignominy can be a badge of spiritual glory.

The instruction in Ephesians (which is the fullest) occurs in 6:5-9. We note that in three successive verses, he says they must serve as unto Christ, and not to men, and he promises by the Spirit that such service will be accepted and rewarded as done to Christ himself.

Our state and circumstances in this life are utterly unimportant because of its brevity and because of the transcending importance of other greater things. Whatever God wills is best, for it is designed to forward His purpose and prepare us for a place in that purpose.

The instruction for slave-owners is all in one verse (9) but it is all-inclusive--"Do the same thing to them."--work on the same principle that everything we do must be done as to and for Christ--"Forbearing--giving up, refraining from--threatening."

Threatening anyone is entirely out of the question for a brother of Christ. If the relationship is not in mutual love and respect, it is not acceptable to God. This command alone would transform the whole picture. "Knowing that your Master also is in heaven: neither is there respect of persons with him."

He will deal with us as we deal with others. On the same subject, Colossians adds an instruction which, fully comprehended, spells the end of slavery (4:1)--"Masters, give unto your slaves that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven."

Brethren were required to treat slaves the same as they are required to treat all men--with love, gentleness, kindness and humility. THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS TO THESE RULES. This would raise and purify the relationship far above anything the world dreams of.

Even in the Roman world there were cases of deep devotion of slaves to benevolent masters.

The brethren and sisters of the first century had no experience of a society not built on slavery. This was an inseparable part of the only world they knew. They had much to learn. The lesson for us is to

examine ourselves for prejudice or preconceived worldly notions absorbed from our fleshly surroundings that have no spiritual reason or justification.

We are all to a large extent creatures of our times, blind sheep following the crowd. We take things for granted as right and acceptable just because the wicked world around us so takes them for granted. We do not stop to think things through for ourselves independently, strictly on scriptural, spiritual principles.

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"Paul a prisoner" (v. 1). Five times in this short letter Paul refers to his bonds. He appears to be associating himself in bondage with Onesimus the slave, in order to appeal more strongly to Philemon.

Only in this letter does he so introduce himself. His normal introduction is "Paul the apostle," but here, in this personal letter of entreaty, he keeps his authority and apostleship in the background and emphasizes his bondage.

Only in two other epistles does he omit the title 'apostle' and those were to the two ecclesias to whom he felt most close -- Philippi and Thessalonica.

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"To our beloved Apphia, and Archippus" (v. 2). These are members of Philemon's household. It would seem most probable Apphia was Philemon's wife and possibly Archippus his son; but any relationship or none at all is possible. Certainly they must be an intimate part of the household or they would not have been included in a letter on a domestic matter. They were obviously concerned in the problem.

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"Grace to you, and peace" (v. 3). These are not just standard words of greeting, but very real and vital things. Without grace from God we are just ordinary, flesh-thinking creatures; and there is no true peace except that which God gives those who give their lives to serving Him in love.

If Philemon was to hope for 'grace and peace' from God, he must extend grace and peace to Onesimus.

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"I thank God, making mention of thee always in my prayers" (v. 4). Another very real and essential thing -- thanksgiving and prayer. Paul had many, many brethren and sisters always in his mind and in his prayers. These are the true spiritual realities of life. This is living fully and abundantly, largely and joyfully.

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"Hearing of thy love and faith" (v. 5). It is a joyful, comforting thing to hear of love and faith being manifested. It gives great encouragement in times of trial and stress. It indicates a healthy, hopeful, thriving condition. To see these things bringing forth fruit in others gives reality and purpose and confidence to our own faith.

Moreover, it creates a oneness, a feeling of closeness and partnership. When we see brethren and sisters putting first things first, we are drawn towards them in love. We can communicate. There is mutual understanding.

But when we see them absorbed in a multitude of empty, passing, present things, getting gain and seeking pleasure, there is a sad sense of distance and barrier and futility.

Paul could have commanded Philemon, by reason of his own authority in Christ, but commanding would not have taught any deep spiritual principles.. Rather on the basis of Philemon's already manifested spiritual fruits and characteristics, Paul desires to build a broader understanding and more universal application.

Love, patience, humility, forgiveness, service and submission to others are NOTHING If not perfectly consistent and completely universal, for to be anything they must be US, not just our convenient cloak for chosen occasions and chosen recipients.

A Christian slaveholder was really in a much more difficult position than a Christian slave, if he understood the principles of godliness and nonresistance to evil, and suffering ourselves to be defrauded.

To be a true brother of Christ he had to go in the face of some of the strongest prejudices of human opinion -- the ones where personal advantage was most deeply at stake. The principles of Christ dissolve all human conventions and distinctions.

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"Thy love toward ALL saints" (v. 5). This must necessarily include the new brother Onesimus. There would be no exceptions, no respect of persons. Paul irresistibly builds his case on Philemon's own already manifested recognition of the true way of life.

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"That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (v. 6). What does this mean? "Communication" means fellowship, partnership, sharing together. It refers to the communion of mutual service between brethren in love, the deep unity of mutual giving and receiving. Both spiritual and material are inseparably combined in one.

"Effectual" means active, energetic, productive, fruitful.

"Acknowledgment" means (and is translated in other versions), perfect knowledge, full recognition, deep discernment.

The word is not just gnosis--'knowledge, realization, comprehension.' Paul is praying that the goodness manifested by Philemon to the brotherhood may result in fuller knowledge and keep comprehension of the glorious blessings that are ours in Christ.

Is he praying that others may be enlightened by Philemon's example or that Philemon himself may be expanded and deepened in spiritual joy and knowledge as a result of, and as a blessing upon, his acts of loving fellowship?

Doubtless both thoughts are involved, but the latter would appear to be the principal one, and most in harmony with the spirit and purpose of the epistle, for Paul's aim is to lead Philemon to a growth in godliness.

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" Though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient" (v. 8). That is, to command what is required, Paul had authority from Christ, as the apostle to the Gentiles, to enforce the law of Christ, by the guidance and power of the Spirit, throughout the ecclesias.

In a spiritual sense he stood in the same relation to Philemon as Philemon did to Onesimus. Yet for love's sake he chose to forgo his authority, and to entreat rather than to command. To command and enforce is to admit the failure of love--"The law is not for the righteous, but for the lawless and disobedient."

The righteous does not need a law. All he needs is to be told what is desired--just the slightest hint--and he delights to comply in love. If Paul had enforced his authority, he would have been contradicting and denying the very thing he was seeking; for he was trying to persuade Philemon to forgo his authority for the sake of love. By himself yielding, he brings great persuasion upon Philemon to yield. Much more can be accomplished by yielding than by forcing. Forcing hardens resistance, while yielding melts resistance away.

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"Paul the aged" (v. 9). When Paul first is brought to our attention he is spoken of as a young man. Within 30 years, according to all accepted reckonings, he was dead. At this time of writing to Philemon, he was probably 50 to 60 years old. How then, does he speak of himself here as 'aged'?

Like Christ, though not to the same degree, the full and intense activity of his life was packed into a small compass. When we consider his experiences--the beatings, the hardships, the sleeplessness, the cold and hunger and long weary laborings--we can see how he was "Paul the aged" in that short period of time.

Life is not just a matter of existing for a certain length of time. It is doing. It is intense, and purposeful, and useful activity.

By scriptural standards, living in relaxed personal self-pleasing is not even life at all in the true sense, but a hideous form of living death--

"She (or he) that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth" (1 Tm. 5:6).

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"A prisoner of Jesus Christ." The thought is deeper than just that he was a prisoner on account of Jesus Christ. In the light of what he says elsewhere, it is clear that he sees himself as a prisoner, a bondman, a slave forever OF Jesus Christ, thankfully and joyfully.

The Roman chains he wore he saw as his chains of unity with, and suffering for, Christ. The Romans were but a passing and meaningless shadow, just the faint, hazy, flickering background. The vivid reality that Paul always saw in all his experiences and circumstance was Christ himself, ever beside him.

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"A brother, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16). Though not necessarily required by this statement, it is quite possible that Onesimus was his own less fortunate half-brother, a son of his father, for a man's own children were slaves if their mother was his slave.

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"Knowing thou wilt also do more than I say" (v. 21). Paul specified the principle and indicates the direction, but leaves it to Philemon's largeness of heart and depth of spiritual perception to determine how far.

This is a beautiful aspect of Christ's commands. At any particular time, brethren are at different levels of spiritual perception and experience, and this cannot be forced.

Paul seems to be clearly hinting here at complete freedom for the slave, but he could not presume to suggest it, far less command it. It must come from the mind of Christ working within Philemon himself.

This, too, showed much more kindness and consideration to Philemon--giving him room to freely, voluntarily, manifest his goodness beyond what was asked. There are many lessons in wisdom and courtesy we can learn from this very brief letter from friend to friend.

There is a deep lesson for us in the basic form and nature of this letter itself, apart from the specific message it contains. We should study and copy its spirit and tone. We should learn to feel the affections and emotions it portrays, for Paul is not just being clever and diplomatic to gain his ends.

He is being sincere and Christ-like and gentle and courteous, as all letters should be, especially to brethren. It illustrates the great change that must take place in us--from the natural to the spiritual.

The natural Paul--Saul, the self-righteous, self-important persecutor--could never have written a letter like this. He had to be completely transformed by the love of Christ and the inworking power of the Spirit. Every letter we write should be a manifestation of the mind of the Spirit. It should bear the stamp of the new man of love and gentleness and meekness.

The beauty of the law of Christ is that it fits every social circumstance, it solves every problem, and it raises every activity--even the simplest and meanest--to the level of direct communication with God, dignifying and glorifying every necessary activity of life, however humble it be.

The law of Christ gave a purpose and a nobility and the consolation of an eventual abundant reward and recompense, even to the most hopeless, miserable and degraded toilings of the slave.

The teaching of Christ would cure all human ills, and create a universal brotherhood in which all distinctions and barriers would fall away, and all would serve and submit to one another in love.

"As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them." This of course will never prevail in this present dark world of sin and selfishness, but any who would please Christ must--in their own little personal world that is their life and their relationship to God and all mankind--act on this principle toward all without exception, regardless of what others may do.

--G.V.G.