

PHILEMON 1-21 ST JOHN'S; 4.9.16; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

I expect that some, if not many, of you have had to clear out the house of a family member who has died. Amongst their papers they may have been a packet of old letters. Reading them may have given you a new insight into your relative's life. But at the same time, having only one side of the correspondence can be very frustrating!

We can have similar problems with the letters in the Bible. A particular person wrote each one of them, to particular people in particular circumstances. We can't read them as if they've just arrived in this morning's post. Before we can begin to understand one of Paul's letters, we need to know to whom he wrote it and where they lived, why he wrote it and where he was. We also need to remember that these letters weren't originally written to explain Christian beliefs, but to apply Christian beliefs to a particular situation or need. So we have to be careful about how we apply what they say to our situation or needs.

PHILEMON

The story behind the letter to Philemon is this: Philemon was a Christian in charge of a house-church at Colossae. He owned a slave called Onesimus. Onesimus ran away; he'd probably stolen some money from Philemon before he went.

Slaves often ran away. When they did so, they risked being punished both by their owners and by the legal system. They joined groups of robbers and bandits; or tried to disappear in large cities; or tried to go

abroad; or sought asylum in a temple. Anyone who took them in was also breaking the law, and they too risked heavy punishment if they were caught.

But Onesimus didn't do any of these things. Instead, he found Paul, who was under house arrest, either in Rome or Ephesus. Paul told Onesimus the good news about Jesus, and Onesimus became a Christian. In this letter, Paul describes Onesimus as *my own son in Christ* (v 10); as *useful both to you and to me* (v 11); and as *a dear brother in Christ* (v 16).

Clearly, Paul valued Onesimus very highly. But Paul was in a very difficult position. It was illegal to harbour a runaway slave; if Paul kept Onesimus with him, he'd damage his own good relationship with Philemon. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, with this letter.

There are two major themes in what Paul wrote to Philemon: love and fellowship. Paul loves both Philemon and Onesimus. Philemon is his *friend* in verse 1, and his *brother* in verse 20. Onesimus is also Paul's *dear brother in Christ* in verse 16. And it's on love that Paul bases his appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus: *because I love you, I make a request . . .* (v 9).

But what kind of love is this? It's not an emotion which we can't control. If Paul had appealed to Philemon on the basis of his *feelings*, the chances are that he wouldn't have made any impact at all. This kind of love is a deliberate attitude, an attitude which says: "I want what's best for this person, and I'm going to act towards them accordingly, no

matter what the cost to myself." In Philemon's case, it would cost him very dear genuinely to accept Onesimus back into his household. He'd have to give up his rights over a piece of his property; he'd face anger and scorn from his friends who also owned slaves; he might have to face resentment from members of his own household, especially other slaves.

There's only one thing which could make it possible for Philemon to face all this: the grace of God. This love is the kind of love which God has for each one of us. Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus means that he allows God's love to rule his life, and to guide his actions. In turn, the Lord will help him to love even Onesimus. Twice in this letter Paul prays for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be with Philemon. Paul realises that Philemon will desperately need the Lord's help if he's to do as Paul asks, and show God's love to Onesimus.

The second major theme of Paul's letter to Philemon is fellowship. Fellowship is a hard word to translate. It refers to the fact that Christian believers share their faith in Christ, and so they grow to love one another as Christ loves us. As a result of their love for one another, believers become identified with one another. Like Christian love, Christian fellowship demands a determined attitude. Its an attitude which says: "I'm going to share fully in identifying with my fellow believers, no matter how awkward, muddled, misguided or simply different they may be". Like Christian love, Christian fellowship isn't something which we can do on our own: once again, we need God's help.

The whole of Paul's letter to Philemon shows the working out of Christian fellowship in practice. Paul identified himself both with Philemon and Onesimus. He knew that Philemon would be angry and hurt as a result of his slave having run away. In this situation, Paul would have been breaking fellowship with Philemon if he'd kept Onesimus with him, although that's what he says he'd like to have done (v 13). Instead, Paul wrote Philemon this very gentle and encouraging letter, begging him to welcome Onesimus back. Paul knew that one of the barriers to Philemon doing this would be the money which Onesimus must have stolen in order to travel away from Colossae. So Paul included the promise: *If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account* (v 18).

Paul also identified himself with Onesimus. If Onesimus had remained a runaway slave, he'd have spent the rest of his life dreading being re-captured. If he'd gone back to Philemon on his own, he'd almost certainly have faced a severe punishment, and possibly even death. In v 17, Paul goes so far in identifying with Onesimus as to beg Philemon to *welcome him back just as you would welcome me*.

And Paul was asking Philemon to identify himself with both Paul and Onesimus, by taking Onesimus back and treating him as Paul's dear friend, and a fellow Christian. Although we don't know the outcome of the story for certain, we can be reasonably sure that if Philemon hadn't done as Paul asked him in this matter, he'd have destroyed this letter. So we can assume that the principles of Christian fellowship which Paul describes so strongly were worked out in practice.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?

How can this letter, written into such a specific set of circumstances, such a long time ago, still be God's word to us today?

The principles of Christian love and fellowship are valid for every Christian in every age. But it's not easy to judge how best to put these principles into practice. Here are five reasons why Philemon should take Onesimus back, which we can adapt to our own relationships today:

Firstly, as we've seen, in Christian relationships, love for our fellow believers is more important than our own rights. Philemon would have been within his rights to have Onesimus flogged or even executed. But Paul asks him to have mercy out of love for Jesus.

Secondly, as a new Christian, Onesimus is useful. This is a pun on Onesimus' name, which means 'useful'. If Philemon accepts him back he could be as valuable to him as he's been to Paul.

Thirdly, God can always overrule our human rebellion and foolishness. In verse 15, Paul writes: *It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time.* Paul acknowledges that God has his reasons for what's happened, although they're not entirely clear. Nothing ever happens by chance with God.

Fourthly, although Onesimus was a rebel, he's now become a brother in the Christian family: *now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave; he is a dear brother in Christ.* This radically changes their past relationship of master to slave. When someone becomes a Christian,

their whole life changes, including their relationship with us. We need to work through this very carefully.

The last reason that Philemon should take Onesimus back is that the result will be rejoicing, for both Paul and Onesimus. Ultimately, Philemon and his household will also rejoice, because they'll gain a *dear brother* (v 16). If Philemon refuses to take Onesimus back, it will only result in grief for Paul, and a perpetuation of anger and hurt for Philemon and his household, as well as for Onesimus.

The way in which Paul deals with the problem of Onesimus is an example to us of how Christians should aim to think and to live, and to act in Christian relationships. Paul shows a blend of love, wisdom, humour, gentleness, and tact, and above all his maturity, both in Christian and in human terms. Paul knows Philemon well, and he's confident that he will also act in a similar way, although Paul realises that it won't be easy for him.

To recap: think of somebody who's hurt you very badly. How would you react if they came to see you today, and explained that they'd become a Christian, and asked you to forgive them? Remember: love for our fellow Christians is more important than our rights; new Christians can be useful; God has his reasons for everything; rebels can become Christians; the right course of action will result in rejoicing.