

About a Slave - Paul's Letter to Philemon

Study 1- A Thoughtful Greeting

Introduction

Despite its brevity, Paul's letter to Philemon is perhaps the least read of all the letters of the great Apostle. Part of the reason for this neglect may well be that the letter is tucked away in the New Testament, wedged between Paul's famous Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) and the great letter to the Hebrews, a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Part of the reason may be that Philemon, at least on the surface of things, does not seem to deal with any major doctrinal or ethical teaching. It is a personal letter from Paul to his 'friend and fellow worker' Philemon (vs1) about Onesimus a slave who had fled from Philemon's estate to Rome where he had become a believer. Touching stuff perhaps, but hardly material for serious study and reflection. And yet, the presence of the letter in the New Testament tells us that there must be more to it than this. And so there is, as I hope that we will see by the end of our study of this remarkable letter.

The letter begins in typical fashion with a description of the senders (Paul and Timothy), the recipients (Philemon, Apphia and Archipus), and a benediction of grace and of peace (vs1-3). Of particular interest is Paul's description of himself as a *prisoner*, a word which he uses on two other occasions in the letter (vs1 *cf* vs9,23). Paul's captive status is also highlighted in the letter by a two-fold reference to his *chains* (vs10,13). Could it be that this repeated reference to Paul as a prisoner was designed to identify the apostle in particular with Onesimus' status as a slave and to prepare the way for Paul's request that Philemon be gracious toward the returning runaway in the same way as God in Christ had been gracious to him (vs3)? In this connection it is also worth noting Paul's description of Timothy as 'the brother'. Later in the letter, this is the word that Paul will use repeatedly with reference to Onesimus (*cf* vs16). Paul also uses the key word *restore* in verse 22, a word that sums up what Paul hopes will happen in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. This close relationship of love and gospel partnership within the church is also anticipated in the opening greeting in words like *friend (lit. beloved), fellow worker, sister, fellow soldier* (vs1,2).

What this suggests (and the letter confirms) is that Paul has used a traditional greeting and modified it to prepare the way for his main aim in writing to Philemon. This main aim is that Philemon, who though well within his rights to have Onesimus arrested and prosecuted, perhaps even executed under Roman law as a thief and runaway slave, should in fact welcome him back and treat him as a brother in Christ. In this as we shall see, there are real and important challenges for us as well.

Read Philemon 1-3



Investigate and Think



1. How does Paul describe himself in verse 1?
2. What does he mean by the phrase 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus'?
3. How does he describe Timothy?
4. To whom is Timothy a 'brother'? What does the word imply?
5. Paul uses the language of community and partnership to describe his relationship with Philemon and the church in his home. What words did Paul use? What did each of these words signify in particular?

