



# The Freedom of Three Christians: Paul's Letter to Philemon and the Beginning of a New Age

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**P**aul's letter to Philemon is at once particularly easy and notoriously difficult. For both of these reasons, it offers an excellent introduction to the Pauline corpus. After a brief orientation to the epistle form, readers can identify the letter's senders and addressees, thanksgiving, body, and concluding greetings. They can see that the letter is cowritten, as most of Paul's letters are, and that it is addressed to members of a church, as are all of Paul's letters whose authorship is undisputed. Novice readers can identify key words within the thanksgiving—for example, Greek words for *good*, *refreshed*, and *heart* (or *bowels* in KJV)—and notice that all these reappear at crucial times later in the letter. In twenty-five verses, Paul teaches us the letter form.

In twenty-five verses, Paul also teaches us how difficult it is to read someone else's mail. After studying these verses, even the closest readers of Paul are often left offering what the Car Guys, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, used to call "the mechanic's shrug." We hear the engine's ping, but we cannot puzzle out where the sound is coming from or what it means. How did Paul and Onesimus meet? What does Paul actually want from Philemon? Who owes whom—and what? Is verse 19 a joke? Is it a threat? Why isn't Paul clearer throughout the letter? By following any

*Paul's letter to Philemon is not only a good way to come to know the apostle himself but is a valuable example of how Christians may come to deal with each other and the world. While Paul is bound as a prisoner, his freedom in Christ allows him the grace to reach out to others, even to those with whom he might be at odds.*

one of these questions through the letter's history of interpretation, students can learn how uncomfortable readers of Paul are with not knowing things, and how varied are the ways we fill in the gaps we find.

The letter remains current and compelling, however, not for its form or its gaps but for the way it brings into focus Christian freedom and the transforming possibilities of Christian love practiced in daily life. In Galatians, Paul writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:16). In Romans, Paul exhorts, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8). Paul's letter to Philemon offers a window on Christian freedom and love as three people in very different social locations practice them with one another. At a time in American history when human community across difference is notoriously hard to create and sustain, and when Christian community within "purple" churches is increasingly fragile, this letter sparks the imagination for a more robust practice of bearing one another's burdens in freedom and in love.

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus occupy distinct social locations. In order to see what difference their being in Christ makes in their practice of freedom and love, it is necessary to describe the status each occupies within Greco-Roman society.

## PAUL THE PRISONER

Paul opens the letter by identifying himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Phlm 1:1). He is also, of course, an apostle, though he *never mentions* this feature of his social status in the letter. He is as silent about being an apostle as he is vocal about being a prisoner. After the initial verse, Paul refers four more times to his incarceration. In verse 9, he again calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In verse 10, he notes that the context for the service Onesimus has offered is "my imprisonment." In verse 13, he speaks again of his "imprisonment for the gospel." Finally in verse 23, he greets Philemon from "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus."

With all these references to his imprisonment and his life as a prisoner, Paul ensures that listeners to the letter picture him again and again as confined. Why? One reason may be quite practical: the imprisoned Paul needs the help of friends.<sup>1</sup> While imprisonment was more often used as a means of keeping the accused available for trial than as itself a form of punishment, conditions were still often physically miserable and socially humiliating. Prisoners depended on friends for the most basic necessities such as enough food or adequately warm clothing and bedding. When Paul calls himself a prisoner, he directs the attention of his hearers to the necessities he lacks. Perhaps they will be moved to assist him.

When Paul calls himself a prisoner of *Christ Jesus*, he reframes his detention as a social location related to his being in Christ. He is the prisoner not of those

<sup>1</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, "Remember My Chains: New Testament Perspectives on Incarceration," *Interpretation* 72, no. 3 (2018): 269–81.

who hold him physically but of the one who, for freedom, has set him free (cf. Gal 5:1). Here, as in Philippians 1, Paul finds opportunity in his social location. It is not just that he is enduring the public disgrace of being unable to meet his own basic needs. Incarceration does not mean simply that he represents a financial drain on his friends. By no means! In Philippians, Paul reports that his status as a prisoner has rendered the imperial guard a captive audience for the news that his imprisonment is for Christ, and his situation has emboldened other brothers and sisters to speak (cf. Phil 1:12–14). Likewise, in Philemon, we learn that Paul’s imprisonment has created an opportunity for the relationship between two Christians, Onesimus and Philemon, to be wholly new.

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## ONESIMUS THE SLAVE

Onesimus is a slave in Philemon’s household. While even this element of the letter’s backstory has been disputed,<sup>2</sup> the plain sense of verses 15 and 16 leads the vast majority of readers to conclude that Onesimus and Philemon are, when Paul writes, related to each other as slave and master.

What does this mean for Onesimus? A discussion of the status of Onesimus must begin by noting that slavery in the Greco-Roman world was significantly different from New World slavery. Scott Bartchy’s list of significant differences between the two institutions is important enough to quote in its entirety.

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave’s value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Allen Dwight Callahan, “Paul’s Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (1993): 357–76. For a critique of Callahan’s thesis that Onesimus and Philemon were estranged biological brothers, see Margaret M. Mitchell, “John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (1995): 135–48.

<sup>3</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:65–73.

Slavery in the first century was still slavery: “Greco-Roman slave systems and legal frameworks gave slave owners much room to be cruel or compassionate.”<sup>4</sup> Slaves lacked autonomy with respect to their work and living conditions; their freedom of movement was constrained; corporal punishment was common and legal; and slaves were “generally regarded as sexually available without restriction.”<sup>5</sup> To say that the plight of Onesimus was likely better than that of most slaves in the New World is not to defend this particular way of “maintaining dominance and dependence characteristic of the early Roman Empire.”<sup>6</sup>

Onesimus has long been imagined as a fugitive slave who could well face death upon returning to his master. The letter does not, however, name him as a runaway, and an alternative reconstruction can be at least equally well-argued from the letter. Onesimus may have been sent to Paul by Philemon. Knowing that the imprisoned Paul needed provision, Philemon sent Onesimus with such aid. A variation on this reconstruction imagines Onesimus making his way to Paul on his own, or at least taking personal advantage of having been sent by Philemon. In this scenario, something perilous has happened between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul hints at troubles between the two men in verse 11 (“formerly he was useless to you”) and verse 18 (“If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account”).

What does it mean that Onesimus was formerly useless? Why does Paul offer to pay a debt? Had Onesimus defrauded Philemon? Paul does not answer these questions. It is clear from the letter only that Paul is describing a change. While Onesimus and Paul were together, something happened.

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Did Onesimus convert to Christianity as a result of having spent one-on-one time with Paul? This is the most common way of describing what happened between the before and after pictures Paul paints. It is equally plausible that all three men were already Christians, and the occasion of Onesimus's company during Paul's incarceration gave the two of them time to work out the implications of what it meant to be “in Christ” with Philemon. Paul's letters reveal an apostle who learns as he goes. As he thinks through the particular circumstances that call forth his letters, he discovers more about what a later author will call “the breadth and length and height and depth” of the love of Christ (cf. Eph 3:18).

<sup>4</sup> Bartchy, “Slavery,” 69.

<sup>5</sup> Bartchy, “Slavery,” 69.

<sup>6</sup> Bartchy, “Slavery,” 65–66.

Regardless of one's conclusion about the timing of Onesimus's conversion, when it was time for Onesimus to return home, Paul penned a letter to his master praising the slave and urging Philemon to regard Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16). In the letter, Paul leaves the exact implications of such filial regard unspecified. Nevertheless, we recognize Paul's conviction that something fundamental has shifted in the way Philemon and Onesimus are related to one another.

#### PHILEMON THE *PATER FAMILIAS*

Paul is a prisoner, Onesimus is a slave, and Philemon is the head of a Greco-Roman household. As *pater familias*, Philemon existed at the top of a social pyramid whose layers included other members of his family, men and then women, then freed men, and below them, freed women who were employed by the household, then slaves, men above women, who also worked for the household. Those above others in the pyramid funneled material resources and favors down through the social strata, and those below others in the household handed services and honor (or shame) up.

According to Paul, Philemon demonstrates love and hospitality, and he has the potential to do much good for Christ. He has a duty (v. 8) that Paul trusts he will carry out voluntarily (v. 15). The duty is at least to welcome Onesimus (v. 17), and it will likely extend to something greater since Paul is confident that Philemon will do even more than he is asked to do (v. 21).

#### A WHOLE NEW AGE

Alongside a social structure that casts Philemon as the head of a household, Paul as his imprisoned friend, and Onesimus as his slave, there exists a new age. The revelation (*ἀποκάλυψις*) from which Paul's call sprang was Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.<sup>7</sup> The risen Jesus had revealed himself to Paul personally (cf. Gal 1:11–12 and 1 Cor 15:3–8). That the resurrection had begun, with Christ as the first fruits, meant that the new age had come into existence alongside the present evil age (cf. Gal 1:4). Paul could describe himself and the Corinthians as those "on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11) and later exhort them to open wide their hearts to him, saying, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2b).

J. Louis Martyn's description of the difference between the old age and the new remains among the most stunning. In an article on Galatians, he writes:

<sup>7</sup> The essays in Beverly Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) are readable and engaging examples of reflections on Paul's theology as apocalyptic—that is, shaped by the revelation of the crucified and risen Jesus.

There *was* a world whose fundamental structures *were* certain pairs of opposites:

circumcision / uncircumcision  
Jew / Gentile  
slave / freeman  
male / female.

Thales, Socrates, and Plato—not to mention the later Rabbi Judah—finding themselves *in* such a world, may give thanks that *they* exist on the preferable side of the divide. Those who have been baptized into Christ, however, know that, in Christ, that world does not any longer have real existence.<sup>8</sup>

The structures of the universe have crumbled. In their place, is the unity of all as “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:29) and the Spirit now vying with the flesh as “two opposed orbs of power.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul directs slaves (and others) not to try to change their status, but only because that status will change soon enough—as the new age comes in its fullness and the old age passes away. In Philemon, Paul goes in a different direction. Here Paul is able to imagine at least one household embodying the new age in the midst of the old. Each of the letter’s three principal characters appears to be bound by roles belonging to the old age, yet upon closer inspection, these strictures are inadequate to hold the three in their former lives.

Paul, for example, is bound in prison. He is dependent on others to meet his basic needs; he has no freedom of movement and little clarity about when and how his imprisonment will end. Paul is bound, but he is also free. Paul is free to refrain from using his apostolic authority to direct, or attempt to direct, Philemon’s behavior. He could command something of Philemon (v. 8), and he could have kept Onesimus with him without Philemon’s consent (vv. 13–14). Instead, he writes a letter. The imprisoned Paul is free to risk loving Philemon and Onesimus.

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But is Paul really loving here? Paul’s words in this letter are often experienced as underhanded and manipulative: for example, one can look at the inclusion of “the church in your house” in Paul’s list of addressees and see a ploy to enlist the other Christians in the household to pressure Philemon into doing what Paul

<sup>8</sup> J. Louis Martyn, “Apocalyptic Antinomies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” *New Testament Studies* 31, no. 3 (1985): 415.

<sup>9</sup> Martyn, “Apocalyptic Antinomies,” 417. The flesh (σάρξ) in Paul, of course, does not mean the physical body, but something more like the power of sin or the impulse to be enthralled by the structures of the old age.

wants. One can read, “not to mention your owing me your very self” (v. 19) and recognize that the sentence does the very thing (that is, mentioning Philemon’s debt to Paul) that Paul claims not to need to do!

What if Paul writes as he does not to press Philemon to do something he must be cajoled into doing but instead to encourage Philemon toward a life related to Onesimus in the new age—where they are brothers? Then Paul’s inclusion of the church among hearers of the letter is the way Paul places Philemon in the very community whose love and support he will need in order to relate to Onesimus (and the rest of the household?) in a way that is as different from the surrounding culture as slavery is different from freedom. And Paul’s explicit mention of any debt Philemon may have with Paul as not worth mentioning is a way to raise *and dismiss* anyone’s sense that Philemon must honor Paul’s request because of that web of status, honor, shame, and obligation that shaped interactions across difference in the age that is passing away. Just as Onesimus’s status has changed (he is no longer a slave), so also Philemon’s status has changed (he is no longer indebted to Paul).

Finally, the early Christian movement did not flatten out the Greco-Roman household’s pyramid structure. First-century Christians did not widely refuse to own slaves, or treat women and men equally, and while Paul understood the collection for the Jerusalem church as a sign of unity between Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus, that ethnic distinction persisted as well. Paul’s words about the unity of the church across difference would turn out to be harder to embody at “the ends of the ages” (cf. 1 Cor 10:11) than they had been to write.

Even so, Paul’s letter to Philemon helps us imagine what could be. In the letter, Paul is free simply to ask Philemon what he might have once commanded; Paul is also free to bear whatever financial obligation Onesimus may have had toward Philemon. Philemon is free to receive Onesimus back as a brother; Philemon is also free to bear the burden that Paul’s imprisonment places on his resources. Onesimus is free to return to Philemon in the expectation that he will be received as a beloved brother;<sup>10</sup> and Onesimus is also free to return to Paul, thus bearing some of the burden that Paul’s imprisonment has created for Paul’s life and ministry.<sup>11</sup> This is what life in Christian community looks like: freedom expressing itself in love that bears one another’s burdens. “Through love, become slaves to one another” (Gal 5:16). “Owe no one anything, except to love one another” (Rom 13:8). “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). Even as Paul is imprisoned, and even as Philemon and Onesimus are at odds with each

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd A. Lewis, “An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 232–46, is surely right to point out that the play on Onesimus’s name in v. 11 as formerly useless but now useful cannot be referring to the way a returning Onesimus will now simply be a better slave. “Otherwise we would have to read the latter half of verse 11 as a sign that conversion’s greatest effect on Onesimus was the power for greater diligence in his chores, and that out of his conversation he had ended up with two slavemasters instead of one” (245).

<sup>11</sup> This is almost certainly what Paul is actually asking of Philemon: “Receive this brother of ours as free—freed and free to return to me to help both with my survival and my proclamation of the gospel.”

other, the Spirit of Christ is opening a future for all three of them to be drawn into a kinship characterized by freedom and love.

### HOPE FOR A FRACTURED HOUSEHOLD

I once heard Rabbi Edwin Friedman say that you can only talk to a person who is coming toward you. The letter of Philemon could be used as a way into conversation about how frightening it is to “come toward” a brother or sister in Christ whose values are deeply at odds with one’s own. A group could imagine the fears of each character: What would it be like to be Philemon? Are you losing all your status by treating Onesimus well? And how long before you—or others in your household—start to wonder if anyone should be enslaved? If you are Paul, how scary is it to send back the person who is your own heart—scary for him and for you? And Onesimus: can you really trust that Paul’s letter will make the difference for you? Are you going home to punishment? And if you aren’t, what *are* you going home to? How much social awkwardness will there be as you and Philemon find your way to a different relationship?

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I serve a congregation that includes people from across the political spectrum. We are often a little afraid of each other; we wonder if we can talk together without doing harm to one another. Can we talk, pray, and listen our way to a response *in Christ* to the suffering of refugees? How do we decide what is appropriate action to keep people safe in the church building? How should we faithfully “till and keep” a planet that is warming? The only way to participate in Christian community across the opinions, values, and worldviews that divide us is to come toward each other. Onesimus has to risk going home if his status as Philemon’s brother in the Lord is ever going to be more than a rhetorical flourish on Paul’s part. Philemon can give Onesimus another chance only if he comes toward the man who arrives with a letter from Paul. Paul can gush in the abstract about Philemon’s capacity to refresh the hearts of the saints, but if he is to know that refreshment first hand, Philemon must turn toward him in love.

Likewise, when we do something as frightening and simple as getting to know someone at church who is hard for us to love or understand, we are participating in a countercultural movement. As the Spirit draws us more deeply into each other’s lives, we are bearing witness to a whole new age. ☩

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