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A tender appeal to a Christian master on behalf of his runaway slave.

Paul's Epistle to PHILEMON

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THE letter addressed to Philemon is unique in at least two ways. It is the only strictly private letter in the preserved Pauline Epistles. It is also the shortest. But it is by no means the least influential. For, while it deals with a specific domestic issue, it enunciates basic principles of human rights and responsibilities that continue with telling force.

The Epistle reflects a fascinating human-interest story. The scene of the drama is laid first in Colossae, a town situated on the Lycus River, a tributary of the Maeander, a hundred miles or so inland from the city of Ephesus; and then in Rome, a metropolis astride the Tiber. The chief actors are Paul, servant of Jesus Christ and apostle par excellence to the Gentiles; Philemon, a well-to-do citizen of Colossae and host to a Christian community that met regularly for worship in his house; and his slave, Onesimus.

It appears that Onesimus had not proved true to his name. Onesimus was a common slave name, meaning "useful." However, rather than being descriptive of a desirable characteristic a slave already possessed, a name such as this was frequently given to a slave in the hope that association with the name might cause him to live up to it. But Onesimus had turned out to be a useless fellow, and worse, a thief and a runaway. After robbing his master he had absconded (Philemon 11, 15, 18).

Somehow—we do not know how, we can only conjecture—Onesimus came in contact with the imprisoned Paul in Rome. Perhaps it was through a chance meeting with his fellow townsman, Epaphras, who, as-

sociated with Paul at the time, may have led him to the apostle to seek his advice, or perhaps, as seems more likely, he resolutely fled to Paul for protection and help, having come to know the great apostle while serving Philemon. (It would appear that Philemon had been converted to the Christian faith by Paul [Philemon 19] doubtless during his Ephesian ministry [Col. 2:1].)

However Onesimus became a friend of Paul, we can picture him pouring out the sad tale of his sin and shame, and Paul, on hearing his sorry tale, offering a few words of kindly reproof and advice. He also recounted for the runaway another story—one he had often told, the story of redemption—and perhaps in form reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. One thing is clear, under the apostle's influence Onesimus became a sincere convert to the Christian faith, and a devoted and



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helpful friend to the apostle "in bonds." Indeed, he became such a genial and efficient companion that Paul found it hard to part with him. To do so was, to use his own imagery, as if his very heart were being torn from him (Philemon 10-13).

Imperious Demands

But there were imperious demands that could not be ignored. On the one hand, Paul was obliged by social custom and Roman law, and on the other, by Christian responsibility, to return Onesimus to his rightful master. Onesimus was likewise obligated to return, first by legal requirement and now by Christian ethics.

According to D. R. Goodenough (*Harvard Theological Review*, 22 [1929], p. 181) Athenian law ruled that, should a fugitive slave seek asylum at the hearth of a neighbor or friend, "the householder was under legal obligations to give him protection, at least temporarily, while following one of two possible courses. Either he must reconcile the slave to going back to the master, probably by giving the wretch some assurance that the master's wrath was mollified, or, if the slave persisted in refusing to trust himself with the master, the householder was obliged to put the slave up for sale in the market, and pay the slave's owner the price received. The latter alternative was fraught with serious possibilities for the slave, since in a sale of this kind the circumstances would prejudice prospective buyers against him, and he would probably be purchased only for the roughest sort of service, such as the galleys or the mines. Rather than face such an uncertainty the slave would certainly be glad to go back to the first master if there were any reasonable hope of clemency."

Clearly the demands of ethical responsibility required a considerable sacrifice on Paul's part, but how much more on the part of Onesimus! By returning to Philemon he would place himself entirely at the mercy of his master. J. B. Lightfoot (*St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 306) reminds us that the slave was completely at his master's disposal. For the smallest offense he might be scourged, or crucified, or thrown to the lions.

A suitable occasion for Onesimus' return soon arose. It would seem that a messenger, Tychicus by name, came to Paul's prison, all the way from Colossae, reporting that there was trouble in the church there and requesting the apostle's intervention. So Paul sat down to write in response. The Epistle to the Colossians resulted. At the same time he took opportunity to compose a short note to Phile-

mon as a covering letter for Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9).

A comparison of the letter addressed to the Colossians with that addressed to Philemon makes it clear that both letters were written at the same time and from the same place. Both bear in the address the names of Paul and Timothy (cf. Col. 1:1 with Philemon 1); and both convey, in the salutation, greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (cf. Col. 4:10-14 with Philemon 23, 24). Both were sent to the same city in the province of Asia; and both were carried by the same messengers (Col. 4:7-9). It is even possible that Philemon was to be read to the whole church at Colossae to secure the moral support of its members for the apostle's request on Onesimus' behalf.

And so the apostle wrote: "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister [probably Philemon's wife] and Archippus our fellow soldier [possibly their son], and the church in your house:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philemon 1-3, R.S.V.).

With delicate tact Paul prepares the way for the main purpose of his letter: "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in 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."

It appears that some specific act of liberality on Philemon's part has come to Paul's attention. He makes reference to it, for he is about to suggest something that will test Philemon's generosity.

With rare delicacy he comes to the point: "In view of this, even though I feel perfectly free to exercise my authority in Christ and to command you to do the decent thing, I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. Yes, I could command you as Paul, ambassador of Christ Jesus; but, instead, I appeal to you as Paul, prisoner for Christ Jesus. My request is for my child in the faith, begotten here in this very prison. I mean Onesimus. I know you found him to

Fellowship of Prayer

"I Have Proved God Has Answered Prayer"

"About three years ago I wrote you asking for prayer for the husbands of two of our members. Last year both of these husbands were baptized, but one especially still needs much strengthening in the truth. . . . I am a great believer in prayer and in the power of prayer to change lives. I have proved God has answered prayer on my behalf, often in almost impossible situations."—Mrs. B., of England.

"There Is Nothing Impossible With Him"

"Rejoice with me, for the Lord has heard your prayers. His name should be praised on the housetops. There is nothing impossible with Him who is invisible when we put our trust in Him and let Him take over and do the things we can't."—Miss S., of Tenn.

A Family Reunited

"About a year and a half ago I wrote requesting prayer for a small grandson who had a very bad heart condition. At the same time his father—my son—and his mother were divorced, and there was a lot of trouble and heartache in the home. Today this family is reunited in marriage, and baptized into the truth. My grandson is in normal physical health. I want to say thanks again and again for your prayers, as I am sure this is an answer to prayer. I am now making another request for prayer. I have a younger son who recently married a fine woman with two small girls. They do not attend church anywhere. My son does have a knowledge of the truth, and I so want them in the faith before it is too late."—Mrs. B., of Arizona.

This column is dedicated to the encouragement of prayer for others at the sunset hour each Friday evening. Because of the large number of requests received and the complexities of the problems presented, it is impossible for us to answer each letter personally, but all requests will be acknowledged and will be kept on file in our office. Portions of letters, especially those that tell of answers to prayer, will be published as space permits.

be 'quite useless,' but now, I assure you, he has become 'most useful,' both to you and to me [doubtless, a pun—a play on the name Onesimus].

"Well, I am sending him back to you (it is like tearing out my very heart), even though I would prefer to keep him here with me so that he might minister to me as your representative while I am in prison for the gospel. But without your consent I cannot do so. I do not want this kindness to be done out of necessity, but voluntarily.

"Perhaps, in the providence of God, he was separated from you for just a short time so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, of course, but as more than a slave, a dear brother. He is especially dear to me, but how much more to you, both as a man and as a Christian."

Then follows Paul's earnest entreaty and guarantee: "Now if you consider me as your associate, and I believe you do, receive him just as you would me. Whatever wrong he has done you, or whatever he owes you, charge it to me. Here is my IOU. I will repay everything. (Signed) PAUL. (I hardly think it necessary to remind you that you owe your very life to me!)

"Yes, my dear brother, grant me this one kindness in the Lord. Cheer my heart, in Christ.

"I am confident that I can count on your cooperation. Indeed, I am persuaded that you will do even more than I ask."

Paul concludes with greetings and with a final benediction: "Epaphras [founder of the church at Colossae], my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my colleagues, send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

A. M. Hunter (*Introducing the New Testament*, p. 145), remarks, "Thus Onesimus went back to his old master, and with the best of credentials, an autograph letter from the great apostle."

Have we any further knowledge of Onesimus? Some fifty years after Paul wrote this brief Epistle, another great Christian letter writer, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, sent a letter to the church at Ephesus in which he extols the bishop of that church as "a man of inexpressible love," by name, Onesimus. Was this our Onesimus? It is possible. But the name, as we have already pointed out, was a common one.

This brief letter is important for the light it sheds on the person Paul. It could only have been written by one whose whole life was permeated

God's Praise Is Personal

"Then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

Our heavenly Father is interested in each of His children. We like the emphasis on the individual person, and we do well to remember that the emphasis of the gospel is always upon the individual. We like John's way of expressing this truth: "He calleth his own sheep by name." In heaven there is "joy . . . over one sinner that repenteth," over even "one of these little ones." God is "the God of Abraham and of Isaac"—personally.

We are not mere cogs in a great machine, nor mere grains of sand on the beach of life. We are God's children, each one loved as earthly parents love each child under their care. Our Father says to each of us, "My child, my son, my daughter." Each one is precious to Him. "Jesus knows us individually. . . . He knows us all by name. . . . He knows the very house in which we live."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 479.

There will be nothing wholesale about the cases considered in the judgment. Between God and each of His faithful ones there will be a sweet intimacy. We shall hear that very personal message for which longing hearts have waited: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

In our greatest hymns emphasis is on the individual. "O love that will not let me go." "Nearer my God to Thee." "My faith looks up to Thee." When rulers of earth wish to honor their chosen heroes, the honor is personal. The ruler steps down from his higher seat to the person to be honored, and pins on the medal. May it be our happy lot to stand with the faithful when our Lord gives His loving word of welcome and praise to each of His heroes of faith.

ERNEST LLOYD

by genuine Christian love. In his other Epistles he is seen as evangelist and pastor, as theologian and apologist, but here we see him as a true Christian friend—understanding, patient, tactful, kind, and courteous, and all with a touch of humor.

Attitude Toward Slavery

However, the real significance of this Epistle lies in its clear demonstration of the fundamental attitude of the early church to the whole problem of slavery.

Clearly, Paul takes for granted the presence of slaves in a Christian household. That he should allow such a situation to go unchallenged seems incredible, for who has ever been more passionate in his defense of freedom?

But some factors must be taken into consideration before we charge the apostle with failure to see the real implications of the gospel he proclaimed. In the first place, in most cases the emancipation of slaves

by their Christian masters was not likely to improve the situation of the slaves. Freed slaves had no place ready for them in the labor market. The economy of the Roman Empire was not a free economy, and little scope was given for free laborers. To give the slave freedom might mean only to reduce him to the ranks of the paupers.

Freedmen, as a class, were despised. Most of them depended on the bounty of some patron or else eked out a precarious existence on the public dole of grain. It was the part of wisdom not to demand that converts to Christianity should forthwith emancipate their slaves.

In the second place, had Paul advocated their emancipation he might have done nothing more than incite them to revolt, and thus have called down upon himself the charge of propagating a revolutionary religion, a charge which he was always anxious to avoid.

In the third place, if we understand the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon aright, in the Christian household the slave was no longer a chattel as he continued to be in Roman law (where he was classed as a *res*, "a thing"). Indeed, he was, to employ Paul's own terminology, "a brother beloved" (Philemon 16).

In view of this, the master is bidden to treat his slaves "justly and fairly," knowing that he has "a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1), and the slave is bidden to serve his earthly master "in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22). Thus, when Paul sends Onesimus back to his master, he does not urge Philemon to release him, but he appeals to Philemon to *love* him.

Although Paul did not denounce slavery, by the proclamation of the great truths of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, he so transformed the nature of the master-slave relationship by this love-ethic that a gradual revolution resulted, leading first to the more humane treatment of slaves, then to their frequent manumission, and ultimately to their complete emancipation.

Ellen G. White's comment (*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 459, 460) is apropos: "It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery, and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system."

Little wonder, then, that Paul's Epistle to Philemon has been called the Magna Charta of the slave.