

An Attempt To Listen To God

A Surbey of Philemon

By

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## The Author

Paul the Apostle takes a beautiful role in this book (v.1) presenting himself not as an apostle and apostolic authority (as in 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1) but rather that of an aged intercessor who knows the legal rights of a master, and the grace of God as a principle for living.

Refusing to recognize any distinctions between a “clergy” and “ordinary saints”, a matter so easily done by announcing that “Mr. So in So (a well known evangelist’s name) was helped with another brother”, without mentioning the other brother’s name. Paul would never have permitted such a distinction, for while he does recognize that he is an apostle, he calls other saints his equal as seen in the expressions:

- a) “Fellow labourer” (Phlm. 1:1)
- b) “Fellow soldier” (Phlm. 1:2)
- c) “Fellow citizens” (Eph. 2:19)
- d) “Fellow heirs” (Eph. 3:6)
- e) “Fellow prisoner” (Phlm. 1:23)
- f) “Fellow helper” (2 Cor. 8:23)

## Notes

Philemon is the shortest of all Paul’s letters and can be read in approximately three minutes. It would appear that Paul wrote to Philemon when he was under house arrest at Rome (Acts 28:16; 30-31). At that time he wrote the four “prison” epistles: Philemon, Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians, only one of which was a personal letter. Dr. Luke wrote two personal letters, his Gospel Luke (Lk. 1:1-3) and Acts (Acts 1:1). John also wrote two letters, 2nd John (2 Jn. 1:1) and 3rd John (3 Jn. 1:1). Philemon and Colossians have some similarities:

- a) The same persons are mentioned with Paul. (Col. 4:10; Phlm. 23-24)
- b) They, and the book of Ephesians, were sent at the same time and carried by Tychicus who came with Onesimus. (Col. 4:8-9; Phlm. 10-12)

It is a book about three debtors:

- a) Paul (Rom. 1:14)
- b) Philemon (v.19)
- c) Onesimus (v.18)

## The Principle Persons Concerning Whom The Letter Was Written.

### 1) Philemon:

- a) Philemon, who lived at Colosse (Col. 4:8-9), apparently had a large home in which the local believers met. This was not unusual for the saints also met in a home. They had met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:5) and Nymphas (Col. 4:15). The idea of a “church building” did not come until many years later, thus a major spiritual responsibility was placed on the one in whose home they met.
- b) Although we are not told where Philemon was converted, or how long after his conversion this letter was written to him, it is evident he had a love to the Lord and faith. He must have been a man of means because he had slaves. (vv. 15-16)
- c) Like all of us, it appears that there may have been times when Philemon was finding the way difficult and therefore Paul encouraged him. (Col. 4:17)
- d) There are two persons mentioned in close connection to him, Apphia and Archippus. Since Apphia is a female name, it may be she was his wife, and Archippus a son or close relation in the flesh and in the assembly. (v.2)

### 2) Onesimus

- a) Onesimus was from the city of Colosse. This was when Paul was writing to the saints at Colosse and describes Philemon as “one of you” (Col. 4:9). He had been a slave of Philemon, but after having stolen from him he ran away. (Phlm. 1:15-16)

## Theological Perspective

The difficulty Paul had to deal with was spiritually complex, for does salvation change one's social position or nullify the wrongs done against the law of the land? Onesimus had been, and still was by Roman law, a slave and a runaway. If Paul sends him back to his master, Philemon, then under Roman law, had the right to punish him. That punishment would be justified on two accounts:

- a) The fact that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and no there was no way of repayment.
- b) He was a runaway.
- c) Since he was now a believer, did that change the situation? Paul writes and encourages Philemon not to give the deserved punishment, and yet, not minimize the wrongness of the deed? It demanded great wisdom. God encourages us to ask for wisdom when needed, and that is what He supplied Paul with. This is an illustration of James' admonition: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not" (Jam. 1:5).

## Keys

- a) Key word: Receive (3 occurrences in vv. 12, 15, 17)
- b) Key verses: Ch. 1:10, 11

## Doctrines Manifested

- 1) In a superficial reading it appears that this is just a letter in which a delicate situation was dealt with tactfully. However, upon closer examination it is seen that it is a book which, while it does not teach Christian doctrines, it exhorts the manifestation of those doctrines in daily life. Some of those doctrines are:
  - a) The doctrine of love:
    - i) In 1 Cor. 13 there is given the characteristics of love, some of which are manifested in this book:
      - (a) Love hopeth all things (v. 21)
      - (b) Love endureth all things (v. 1, 9)
      - (c) Love seeketh not her own (vv. 13, 18)
      - (d) Love is kind (vv. 10, 21)
    - ii) When the mind is occupied with God and the riches of His grace toward us, then one is softened toward others. The Lord told the parable of the two debtors who owed various amounts of money. The One who had been forgiven the greater ought to have been gracious to the one who owed the less, but he failed to do this, and the judgment was punitive (Matt. 18:23-35). A hard, critical, and unforgiving heart knows little of divine grace.
  - b) The doctrine of the mystical body of Christ:
    - i) The mystical body of Christ is the truth that every believer, irrespective of background, social position, spiritual positioning by God, male or female, are all organically united into one body. Concerning this unit Paul writes: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free" (1 Cor. 12:13); "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This is the doctrine and the Holy Spirit emphasizes it by uniting in this book:
      - a) Archippus, a freeman; Onesimus, a slave. (Phlm. 1:2, 12)
      - b) Philemon, a man; Apphia, a lady. (Phlm. 1:1-2)
  - c) The doctrine of grace:
    - i) Paul, once a religious Pharisee, a scourge to the saints, now a Christian evangelist. (Acts 9:1-2; Rom. 1:14-16)
    - ii) Onesimus, a thief, now saved. (Phlm 1:10-11)

- d) The doctrine of fellowship:
- i) Note how Paul speaks of the other believers, irrespective of their social standing.
    - (a) Brother (vv. 7, 16, 20) which emphasizes the fact of fellowship.
    - (b) Dearly beloved (v.1) which emphasizes the extent of fellowship.
    - (c) Love, faith, joy (vv.5, 7) which emphasizes the demonstration of fellowship.
    - (d) Laboring, companionship, hospitality (vv.1, 2) which emphasizes the reality of fellowship.

2) Truths presented by relationships:

		The Characteristic Is
“Brother” ( v.1), “Apphia” who was a sister (v.2) “ my son” (v.10)	These are the terms in a family	Love
“Fellow labourer” ( v.1; 24)	This is the term of the working man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation cp. Ruth</li> <li>• Working together</li> </ul>
“Fellow soldier” (v.2) “Fellow prisoner” (v.23)	This is a term of war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loyalty, cp. Uriah (2 Sam.11:14-17)</li> <li>• Fighting together</li> </ul>
“Partner” (v.17)	This is the term indicating fellowship, therefore: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christian suffering</li> <li>• Christian courtesy (v.14)</li> <li>• Christian consciousness (v.4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unity. cp. Psa. 133</li> <li>• Pulling together</li> </ul>

## Structures and Outlines

1) No. 1

Paul’s Argument Built On		
The character of Philemon	vv. 4-7	His Praise
The conversion of Onesimus	vv. 8-16	His plea
The confidence he has in Philemon	vv. 17-25	His Promise

No. 2

Main Person	Reference	Relevance of Grace	Result
Philemon	v. 4-7	The perfections of grace in him	Praise
Onesimus	vv. 8 & 17	The pursuing of grace toward him	Plea
Paul	v. 18-22	The plans of grace for him	Pledge

- 2) Dr. G. Scroggie observes that Philemon has:
- a) Personal value:
    - i) Philemon throws light on Paul as a Christian diplomat in dealing with people's rights in the cultural and spiritual rights of individuals.
    - ii) His readiness to do something for a person of no social standing, a Gentile slave.
  - b) Ethical value:
    - i) The balancing of the rights of Philemon and the wrongs of Onesimus.
    - ii) Under the law there was the trespass offering (Lev. 5:1, 4) which dealt with the damage done to others. Does christianity do away with such a principle? Does it not matter the damage one does to another because the Blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanseth us from all sin? (1 Jn. 1:7)
  - c) Providential value:
    - i) How wonderful to see the overruling hand of God in the affairs of life. For reasons known only to Himself the Lord kept Joseph in a prison for a considerable time after he had interpreted the dreams of the baker and butler (Gen. 40:23; 41:9). He overruled through the disobedience of Vashti for the bringing in of Esther for the deliverance of His people (Esther chs. 1-2; 7).
  - d) Practical value:
    - i) The thought of Onesimus coming back could arouse anger, perhaps long suppressed in Philemon, for being under Roman law he could severely punish Onesimus? On the other hand, since Onesimus was now a believer, would he not want to repay that which he had stolen, or if he could not do that, then work freely for Philemon until the debt was paid?
    - ii) Philemon could use the law of the Old Testament and demand that he was to be paid back in full plus one-fifth. (Lev. 5:16; 6:5)
    - iii) One of the tragedies among Christians is the tendency to remember the mistakes others make and talk of those wrongs for many years, damaging others all their lives. What if the Lord was to remember all our rebellions?
    - iv) In the difficulties we face with other believers and the unsaved, the Lord permits those hurts to use them as stepping stones in our spiritual development and as opportunities to show the lovely character of God.
    - v) So often genuineness of christian love is in the question. "Brother and sister" are lovely terms which can simply be a superficial statement.
    - vi) Onesimus had to go back to where he went astray, Abraham had to go back to Bethel (Gen. 13:3), and Jacob had to go back to Esau (Gen. 32:6; 33:1).
  - e) Evangelical value:
    - i) No matter what the circumstances, live in such a way that if the individual is unsaved we can present the gospel to them, and if saved we can adorn the gospel of Christ.
  - f) Social value:
    - i) What is the relationship between christianity and the culture around us?
      1. Does Christianity condone slavery?
      2. What should our response be to bad working conditions?
      3. What is the responsibility of a Christian employer to his employees?
      4. When one becomes a Christian does that nullify the consequences of our crimes again man, i.e; if an individual murders another and goes to jail and then gets saved, should that cancel the sentence?

## Verse Notes

This is not meant to be a commentary, but rather observations on some of the verses.

### Verse 1

- a) Paul, he had known what it was to be a runaway slave, running away from God and a slave to sin.
  - i) Paul a prisoner:
    1. Paul viewed himself not as a prisoner of Rome, but as he declares: “the prisoner of the Lord” (Eph. 4:1); “of Jesus Christ” (Eph. 3:1; Phlm. 1:1, 9, 23). He speaks of “bonds” saying: “My bonds in Christ” (Phil. 1:13); “I am an ambassador in bonds” (Eph. 6:20); “I am also in bonds” (Col. 4:3). Yet, he does not complain nor bemoan that he cannot do the missionary work he once did, but using the situation of having soldiers around him constantly, he presented the gospel and prayed, the result being that: “The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places” (Phil. 1:12-13). This was the attitude of Joseph. How deeply hurt and angry he could have been with his brothers because of that which they did to him when they sold him as a slave and brought heartbreak to their father! Then there was the years in the prison. What wrongs he had endured because of their hatred toward him. Yet, he saw all the events on a higher plane and said: “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good” (Gen. 50:20). If we go to the supreme example, we see the Lord being rejected, despised, set at nought and killed: “but God meant it unto good”. When this is truly seen, how can we hold umbrage against our brethren and sisters?
    2. The witness for the Lord came at a heavy price. John was on the Isle of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) and there has been many thousands who even today suffer for the Lord. It is not to be wondered at that the writer of Hebrews writes: “Remember them that are in bonds” (Heb. 13:3).

### Verse 3

- a) Prayer was a major part of Paul’s life and the Spirit of God is pleased to record the mention of them in:
  - i) Rom. 1:8-12; 15:5-7, 13, 33; 16:25-27
  - ii) 1 Cor. 1:4-7
  - iii) 2 Cor. 1:3-5; 12:7-10; 13:14
  - iv) Eph. 1:3; 15-23; 3:14-23
  - v) Phil. 1:8-11
  - vi) Col. 1:9-12
  - vii) 1 Thess. 3:11-13
  - viii) 2 Thess. 1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:5
  - ix) 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16.
  - x) Phil. 1:4-6

### Verse 4

- a) I thank my God. One of the first manifestations of sinful man is being “unthankful” (Rom. 1:21) but Paul was a thankful man. He gives thanks for:
  - i) The faith of the Romans that was “spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8)
  - ii) “The grace of God which is given you” (The Corinthians) (1 Cor. 1:4)
  - iii) Being able to: “speak with tongues more than ye all” (1 Cor. 14:18)
  - iv) Being able to: “thank my God upon every remembrance of you” (Phil. 1:3)
  - v) Philemon: “making mention of thee always in my prayers” (Phlm. 1:4)

### Verse 5

- a) Paul now will tell Philemon that the love he has toward all the saints is widely recognized. However, it is one thing to show “love” to those who have done us no damage, but Onesimus had done damage. Will Philemon’s love for all the saints be bigger than the damage Onesimus has done to him? Now Onesimus is suddenly coming back into Philemon’s life. The other saints and slaves will be watching the response

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of Philemon. Will he be accepted or rejected? Will spirit begotten love rise above the flesh and righteous judgment? Paul wants Philemon to understand that faith enables the individual to see things on a higher plane, and Paul's concern is that Philemon will rise to that higher level (vv.10–18).

- b) What is meant by “faith . . . toward all the saints”? To live by faith means to live in the light of eternity, as Philemon lived his life. That which he did for the saints was not out of selfish motivation or egotistical glory but in the awareness that it was being done for the glory of the Lord and eternity's values.

### Verse 6

- a) Speaking of the communication of “thy faith” means that it might be actively worked out by the showing of your “faith”. It may promote the knowledge of the energy of every good deed that is in you toward Christ.
- b) It seems to be a contradiction between what Paul says here: “Every good thing which is in you” and “in me dwelleth no good thing” (Rom. 7:18). There is no contradiction for Romans is speaking about what I am naturally as a child of Adam, whereas in Philemon the words are added “in Christ Jesus”.

### Verse 7

- a) The ancients used bodily parts to describe emotions and motives, the same as we do. One might say, so in so is “a pain in the neck”, simply meaning that the individual is a nuisance. They used the word “bowels” to express deep emotions. For instance:
  - i) “I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ”. (Phil. 1:8)
  - ii) “Put on . . . bowels of mercies” (Col. 3:12)
  - iii) In Philemon he speaks of “bowels” in:
    - 1. “The bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother” (v.7)
    - 2. “Receive him, that is, mine own bowels” (v.12)
    - 3. “Yea, brother . . . refresh my bowels in the Lord” (v.20)

### Verse 8

- a) Paul does not ask for to show him a favor but that Philemon might manifest the fulness of the work of grace in him.

### Verse 9

- a) Paul pleads for a kindly reception of Onesimus on six grounds:
  - i) “For love's sake” (v. 9)
  - ii) “As Paul the aged” (v.9)
  - iii) As “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (v.9)
  - iv) As “a brother beloved, specially to me” (v.16)
  - v) “If he . . . oweth thee ought, put that on mine account” (v.18)
  - vi) Because of “how thou owest unto me” (v.19)

### Verse 10

- a) Salvation will seek to make past wrongs right. Zacchaeus said: “I restore him four fold” (Lk. 19:8). It necessitates the mending of broken relationships thus indicating that doing wrong to others and maintaining broken relationships are things of the past.

### Verse 14

- a) The expression “that thy benefit” may be somewhat hard to understand since it would seem to indicate that Philemon would be enriched by Onesimus being with Paul. Surely it is Paul who would receive the benefit! That which the verse is saying is: “Philemon, by your Christlike character of graciousness being seen toward Onesimus, and further generosity in canceling any damage incurred by that which he stole, and of your consideration for me the aged so that Onesimus will benefit me”, will be manifested to all.

### Verse 15

- a) There must be a distinguishing between divine sovereignty and man's free will. The defrauding of Philemon by Onesimus was an act of his own will. To his mind it was an activity of cleverness, but in divine sovereignty, God overruled so that he heard the gospel and got saved, and that which was a wrong

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God marvelously turned it around to become a blessing to him and an opportunity for Philemon to grow and show the grace of God. God does not condone the wrong but will use it for His greater glory.

### Verse 18

- a) Righteousness does not ask for forgiveness or reinstatement to be granted without due consideration of the wrongs done. There will be a recognition of the wrongs done and that which can be done to reimburse the offended.

### Verse 22

- a) Paul is very open about what he expects of the saints. It is at times stated that those who work for the Lord full time should not speak about money, and many would be horrified if a man wrote to them saying they will be expected to “bring them another way”.

### Verse 24

- a) Demas. This is a sad history for it is a man who was with Paul during his imprisonment (Col. 4:14; Phlm. 1:24) and yet at the end, forsook him for this “present world” (2 Tim. 4:10).

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**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.  
John 16:13**

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