

George Philip Bible Readings

The Book of Philemon

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1-3

The Letter to Philemon was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome, recorded in Acts 28:14b-31. The letter to the Colossians was written at the same time and both letters were sent by the hand of Tychicus who was accompanied by Onesimus, the slave who is the central figure in this short epistle (Col. 4:7-9). We need to note carefully that this letter is not just a personal appeal from Paul to his Christian friend Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. It is written to the church (2) meeting in his house, and this may indeed be identified with the church in Colossae for that town was small and relatively unimportant. From Col. 4:12-17 it is clear that Paul expected there to be an interchange of letters between the churches of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis which formed a closely related group. This being so we need to take Paul's words on the subject of masters and slaves in Col. 3:22-4:1 in close connection with the letter to Philemon which illustrates the principle of master-servant relationship in one specific case of the runaway slave who had absconded with some of his master's belongings. We are dealing with the principles and attitudes that should govern all of working life. The theme is the application of the gospel to the whole of life.

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1-3

When Paul introduces himself at the beginning of a letter he describes himself sometimes as an apostle (Col.1:1), emphasising his authority, sometimes as a bond slave or servant of Jesus (Rom.1:1), emphasising the surrender of all his personal rights to the One who is his Master. But here he simply refers to himself as a prisoner for Jesus' sake, perhaps indicating in a quiet way just how much he had lost and suffered for the gospel's sake. If this is so then he sets his own loss of all things (Phil. 3:7- 8) over against Philemon's loss of a slave. He sets forth his own refusal to claim his rights according to the pattern of Christ Phil. 2:5-8) as an example and challenge to the church in the house of Philemon. It may seem an obvious thing to us that the converted slave should be forgiven and reinstated rather than punished, and indeed we may wonder why Paul did not denounce the whole business of slavery which was an accepted part of the society of his day. We must remember that it is easy to denounce social evils, especially if they are at a distance, just as many denounce apartheid in far-off lands while condoning and participating in the social injustice and sexual immorality in their local situation and personal lives. We need to remember that in the world, as in the church, it is easy to stir commotion and to start a revolution, but far more demanding to build something healthy and stable for future generations. Any fool can be a critic and knock things down, but it takes wisdom, faith, self-sacrifice and a lot of hard work to build a new society. Of course, as God made plain to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:9-10) the two processes go on together under the wise providence of God. Don't ever forget God who is always at work.

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1-3

Consider this quotation from a. secular document dated A.D. 298 as an indication of the social attitude which is the context of our studies. 'I commission you by this writ to journey to the famous city of Alexandria, and search for my slave about 35 years of age, known to you. When you have found him you shall place him in custody, with authority to shut him up and whip him, and to lay a complaint before the proper authorities against any persons who have harboured him, with a demand for satisfaction.' Slaves had no rights. They were simply the property of their masters and the treatment they received would vary according to the temperament and attitude of the master. We read in the gospels of secular men who loved their slaves (Matt. 8:5-6; Lk. 7:2-3). In the Old Testament clear distinction was made between the Jewish and Gentile slaves, the former having a right to freedom after seven years, plus provision to enable them to make a new start in life, with the choice, if so desired, of staying with their masters (Ex. 21:2-6; Dent. 15: 12-18). This suggests that slavery was not always the terrible thing we reckon it to be. Of course, there were rogues and profiteers as there are in every generation. It does not follow in our day that

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because a man is a Christian he will necessarily deal honestly with you in business! That is sad but true. The story of Joseph in Egypt tells of one kind of slavery (Gen. 39:1-6) but Ex. 21:20-21 tells of brutal discipline, and 1 Sam. 30:11-15 tells of men being abandoned when they became a burden. The whole of this subject of slavery is dealt with fully in such reference books as the New Bible Dictionary (IVP) and shows the dangers of sweeping generalisations. The means by which this and other social evils can be dealt with are not always immediately evident, and in our own day when the 'theology of liberation' is the vogue we must be wise under God in word and action lest the issue is merely greater confusion and bondage.

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1-3

There is a note of grace and an atmosphere of graciousness set right at the start of this letter written by a man who had forfeited all freedom for Jesus' sake and who had accepted his personal restrictions without bitterness (Phil. 4:11-12). Paul was not going to ask from Philemon any standard of Christian behaviour and personal loss which he himself had not already met. Example is a powerful witness and appeal (John 13:12-17; 1 Pet. 2:21-23). Paul's warm greeting names three people, Philemon, whose work he sets alongside his own; Apphia, possibly his wife; and Archippus their son, whom Paul describes as a fellow soldier, possibly ministering to the church in Laodicea. (Could it be that the issue of the treatment of slaves was part of the decline into lukewarmness of this wealthy church - Rev. 3:14-22?) When Paul greets also the church in their house he may be referring to the fact that the whole household of Philemon had been converted when the gospel was first preached in that area. We have so individualised the gospel that we find this kind of thing almost foreign to us and we react emotionally rather than theologically to the idea of household baptism as in Acts 16:31-34. But the family was much more a unit in these days (and in some areas of the world it still is) and such were the bonds of love and loyalty within the family that the influence of grace touching and saving one member would very likely win the others also. Think of Joshua's testimony in Joshua 24:15. We have so much to learn about this (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-2) and if our eyes were more on God and our hearts more fixed on His gracious covenant promises, we would live more by faith than by fear.

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The church in Philemon's house could have been simply his own family together with his slaves or it could have been the regular meeting place of the believers in that community. If the latter was the case then Paul would have seen to it that there was some order and discipline by appointing elders as he did in every place (Acts 14:23; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). This is important, in our day when 'house churches' have become a fashionable alternative to gathering with the main body of believers. This is not, to devalue house groups but to emphasise that a group of believers is not necessarily a church. It may be a fellowship and a beneficial one in terms of prayer, Bible study and in that personal one-to-one friendship that is not always possible in a big congregation. But there are dangers, psychological as well as spiritual. Some like to organise others because it satisfies their desire for power and gives a sense of significance over against their innate insecurity. Some gather around them the wrong kind of people and others make a wrongly elitist group. Sometimes a house-church can start as something manifestly useful and God-honouring, and in time, perhaps unconsciously, become something quite different in inspiration and influence. But all these dangers apart, we do learn from these verses the great realm of service that is possible through our homes. Remember Jesus' words, 'I was a stranger, and you took Me in,' (Matt. 25:35 and the words of Heb. 13:2 regarding entertaining angels unawares. There was a lorry driver's home in Devonport and a missionaries' home in Colombo that did more to establish and encourage me in my early days of conversion than I could ever put into words. It is not a case of lavish entertaining, which can be a distraction, but one of caring. Take care of Jesus' sheep and lambs (John 21:15-17).

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Paul is always telling people that he prays for them and also makes plain what it is he prays for. It is marvellous to know you can count on people's prayers but an added blessing when they tell you. On the other hand what an encouragement to prayer it is when you hear of the manifest growth in grace of those you pray for. Note how Paul speaks of 'my' God. It is something very personal and may indicate the depth of Paul's thinking about the Covenant-keeping God who had made him His own and who was not ashamed to be called his God (Heb. 11:16). Note also that the testimony to the grace of Philemon was quite unsolicited. Paul had heard from others, as he had heard about the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2-10) and, of course, Paul did his own bit of good-speaking about others (2 Thess. 1:3-4), which is so much healthier than forever indulging in niggling criticism and detraction. What pleased Paul about this group of Christians was that their love and faith were vitally bound together. Their love was not vague sentiment, nor was their faith vague credulity or cold doctrine. Their faith was centred on the Lord Jesus and their love was expressed to all the saints for their refreshment and encouragement. This loving faith and faithful loving had not operated only in the local fellowship. Its overflow had reached Paul himself and, as is always the case, the loving pastor and teacher had been mightily heartened by the manifest growth in grace of those he had laboured among and prayed for. We cannot emphasise too much the fact that we are members one of another and give and receive far more than we realise, for better or for worse.

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There is an important lesson in v. 6 concerning the sharing of faith and follows on from the closing words of yesterday's note. Observe that it is a sharing of faith and not a recounting of experiences, nor that unhealthy sharing of sins and problems which has become a modern evangelical obsession. The sharing of faith with others has its objective in increasing knowledge and grasp of all the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. In terms of growth in grace, personal holiness and spiritual service, it is essential that we should have a clear realisation of all that we now possess in Christ. This is the heart of the matter. We do not go looking for 'the blessing' or for some indefinable 'extra' that will make us 'real' Christians. We must rather listen to what the Bible tells us of what Christ has done for us and what we have been given in Him. Fundamental to our whole position is that we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings and have been sealed and guaranteed in respect of salvation and life by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-14). We have been raised from the dead to newness of life in Christ Jesus (1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 6:4). We lack nothing, for all things are ours (1 Cor. 3:21-23). We could range through the New Testament pondering all the passages which speak of the full, three-dimensional salvation from sin, self and Satan, from the world, the flesh and the Devil, that is ours totally and unconditionally in Christ. This is indeed glorious gospel news and opens for us a new way of life and a new pattern for our dealings with one another. In this way Paul had now prepared the way for his objective in this letter which was an appeal to the converted slave-owner on behalf of Onesimus.

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The word 'therefore' indicates that Paul's words are based on and stem from the profound spiritual truths enunciated in the first seven verses. He had spoken of faith, love and fellowship in Christ. He had emphasised the need to be 'active in sharing your faith' (v.6). And he had spoken openly in the church regarding the manifest and deserved reputation Philemon had as a man of true Christian love. Therefore, on the basis of love, without in any way denying his apostolic right to command, Paul appealed for clemency for the slave. When Paul spoke of what ought to be done, he was indicating that a spiritual principle was involved in this matter of 'industrial relations', and that a certain attitude was incumbent on Philemon as a Christian duty. But Paul did not take the solemn road of duty, even though he mentioned it, but as an ambassador he appealed for reconciliation, as he did also in 2 Cor. 5:20. He refers to himself as 'Paul, an old man' and thus make the appeal a very tender and lowly one. Here is the King's ambassador, invested with royal power, but bowing with tender entreaty. Is there not a reflection here of our

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Lord's gracious humility in bending low down to the sinful sons of men? Paul yielded his apostolic honour, because position and rights meant little to him, and in doing so he set a very demanding standard for Philemon for it was his rights as a master that he ought now to yield for Jesus' sake. We need to read the great chapter on love in 1 Cor. 13, perhaps in J.B. Phillips' translation, and then we need to ponder the fact that the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). The pattern for all relationships is that of Jesus.

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10-12

These verses overlap and we must hold to their sequence and development. We are not told how Onesimus ever reached Rome, how he was brought into contact with Paul, how often or in what circumstances he heard the gospel, but we are told he was converted through the instrumentality of the great missionary. It is thrilling to see the value Paul put on this humble convert. He may not have been valued highly by the world's standards but he was precious to the Lord and to Paul, redeemed at infinite price (1 Pet. 1:18- 19). But there is more than spiritual valuation; there is human affection, and it shows the bond between Paul and his converts. 'It is a comment too on what the grace of God has wrought in the apostle himself. This is the one-time self-righteous Pharisee, the heir of Jewish exclusiveness, and he is speaking of a Gentile, and a Gentile slave at that, from the very dregs of Roman society yet he can refer to him as a son. So his statement (Col. 3: 11) that 'there is neither Greek nor Jew bond or free' is no empty formula but, reflects the attitude of heart to which he himself has been brought by God.' (Carson). The name 'Onesimus' means useful or beneficial and there is a pun on the man's name in v.11. A slave who has run away is a dead loss, but when that slave returns a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5: 17) with a revolutionised attitude to work (Col. 3:22-23), then he is useful indeed. But the usefulness is not just on the old level as a working slave, possibly with some specialised training, but on a new spiritual level. Paul is saying to Philemon that to have a Christian man like Onesimus on the staff will be nothing but benefit. Would your employer or your minister give you a reference like that? Would you prove worthy of it?

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10-12

What a wealth of love and what an appeal of love there is in v.12! 'Paul speaks of what it cost him to send Onesimus back; and how he would gladly have retained him. In sending him he has sent part of himself.' (Carson) It was for the good of Onesimus and of Philemon, and for the instruction of and as an example to the whole church that this sacrificial and costly decision was taken. It all points to the Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who did not grasp His rights but made Himself of no reputation (Phil. 2:6-7). Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor so that through His poverty we might be made rich (2 Cor. 8:9). We are compelled to think of the Father who spared not even His own Son but freely gave Him up for us (Rom. 8:32). When we read of Paul sending his very heart, do we not think of John 3: 16 and of the deep words of Paul in Acts 20:28 when he spoke of the church of God which He purchased with His own blood? We will never really plumb the depth of redeeming love, nor can we ever escape from the comprehensive appeal of Peter, based on the Saviour's dying love (1 Pet. 1; 18ff). The great men of God have always been moved to see that the Cross excluded all pride and glorying (Gal. 6; 14) and they would have said their 'Amen' to the words of C.T. Studd. 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him.'

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing so divine,
Demands my out, my life, my all.'

(Watts)

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13-14

Note how Paul speaks here of personal desire and inclination (13) and then as an act of will sets duty first (14). Doing right was the important thing to Paul. This does not mean, as some foolish people seem to think, that the unpleasant must always be the will of God. That suggests that God is at best a spoilsport and at worst perverse. He is neither. But it is all too easy to rationalise and to persuade ourselves that what will be pleasant and immediately satisfying must be God's will, so that we neglect the plain issues of duty. It would have been easy for Paul in prison circumstances to keep Onesimus and to say, 'I'm sure Philemon would agree.' But Paul would not presume upon his good friend, especially on such a touchy issue as taking the side of a runaway slave who had stolen from his master's house. Neither would Paul be the kind of man who would listen to tittle-tattle and complaint about his master from a runaway slave who had put himself in the wrong by his own actions. We do well to abstain from all appearance of evil 1 (1Thess. 5 22AV) and to remember the clear principles of the law of God regarding the value of independent witnesses, lest we be taken in by false accusation (Deut 17:6). Paul's attitude to Philemon respecting his personality, rights and his dignity is worthy of emulation. Friendship must never be presumed upon and familiarity must never be mistaken for intimacy. A great deal of misunderstanding and hurt, and indeed hindrance to the work of the Gospel, would be avoided if we would only learn to give people their place and to treat them with the same grace as the Lord Jesus has shown to us.

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13-14

Note how wisely Paul dealt with his friend, indicating in v.13 the responsibility he had to minister to Paul. Here and elsewhere Paul stated the principle that those who receive blessing through a human instrument of the gospel are under obligation to respond in practical terms. There is such a thing as spiritual debt and Paul hoped that Philemon would discharge that debt willingly and gladly. If we look back to v.8 we see that Paul had already made plain the spiritual issue. For the work's sake Philemon really had no choice and Paul could well challenge him in such a way before the whole church that he would have no option but consent. This kind of approach is sometimes necessary but it is not wise to use it as a first approach. To take a collision course when alternatives are available is folly and it is sinful. We do well to learn in this context that a gentle answer turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1), and if some people misconstrue this as softness, weakness or even cowardice it is just too bad. God knows. Later in the letter Paul reminded Philemon of just how great his debt was (19b), for he owed his very conversion to this suffering servant of the gospel. What Paul was calling for from Philemon was true generosity of spirit, for God loves the cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). It is sometimes said that one volunteer is worth ten picked men and, while we would not consent totally to such a premise, it is certainly true that some people's spiritual lives are stunted because they have never in all their lives done one truly generous act. There is no real reason why we should be reluctant to be Christlike. He is our example as well as our Saviour.

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Paul's close reasoning pressed in on Philemon and this letter being read to the whole church must have become one of the initial influences to bring about a total change in the attitude to slavery and to the whole of human relationships. In v.13 Paul had made it clear that he assumed that Philemon would jump at every chance of ministering to him and he suggested that this had in fact taken place through Onesimus. Just as Paul thought of himself as a personal representative of Jesus, so Philemon had to think of Onesimus as *his* representative. In this way Paul now introduced the thought of God's providential ordering of this whole situation. That God was in it cannot be doubted, for the slave was converted and became a useful Christian worker with Paul. This does not mean Paul was excusing the slave's stealing or his lawbreaking in running away. It is never useful to suggest that wrong is right but in the context of human wickedness and sin there is a greater hand at work. This is the lesson of the story of Joseph's interpretation of his life's experiences when his brother sold him into slavery. They meant evil but God was working for the long-term good of His people and his work (Gen. 50:15-21). If we marvel at this

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defection of a slave turning out to be a significant factor in the purposes of God, how much more we must marvel at the defection of the Jews in the crucifying of their Messiah-King resulting in the salvation of the world (Rom. 11:11-12). We underestimate God and all too often we think He is not in a situation just because we cannot see Him.

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15-16

If our eyes were more truly fixed on God, and our wills more securely resting in His good and perfect will and in His power to bring it to pass, we would learn to make much more gracious interpretations of situations than we tend to do. We must learn to accept by faith (for we will never do it by sight of circumstances) that all things do in fact work together for good (Rom. 8:28) and that God is always working on a bigger scale than appears, and that the end product of God's working is a greater, more gracious, more fruitful and more hopeful situation than at the beginning. This is part of the lesson of Hebrews 11 which makes plain that by faith these heroic men and women were looking to God and looking for something bigger and greater than they had yet known. Paul counselled Philemon to see God's hand in all that had happened, and instead of simply 'reacting', which is the natural but not the Christian thing to do, to see the opening up of a new stage of God's blessing for himself, his converted and restored slave, and the whole church. Without doubt the latter state was going to be better than the former and Paul may very well have had in mind here the rich rejoicing in the Father's house after the return of the prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). In his reception, restoration and reinstatement to service and honour, a whole new life filled with possibilities had begun. Of course, there will always be the bitter, legalistic elder brother whose narrow concept of duty has little in it of love and grace. But remember Onesimus was no longer merely a slave, he was a member of the household of God (Eph. 2:18-19) with all the privileges and responsibilities that that state brings.

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15-16

Note carefully that Paul does not say that Onesimus was no longer a slave. He was to be taken back to his job and he was to be treated as a brother in Christ, but not as a full son of the family. There are differences which, if not recognised in the right way, will lead only to familiarity, which breeds contempt not respect and leads to disorder and not peace. There is nothing in this epistle, or anywhere else in the New Testament, that can be used to institute revolution by forced and physical means. Not even in this epistle, written to a specific church situation affecting only believers, does Paul say that slavery in itself is wrong. This reticence is not simply to avoid social disorder, because when Paul spoke out against idolatry he caused a riot and almost a general strike in Ephesus (Acts 19:23ff). It was the abuses of slavery and the dehumanising effect of such abuses on servant and master alike that Paul was striking at. The principles he enunciated here and elsewhere (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1) strike the death knell of all institutions and practices which take from men their essential dignity, humanity and their intrinsic value as people. Paul recognised that work is part of the very order of creation (Gen. 1:28; 2:15) and that it is a means of grace in a fallen world (Gen. 3:17-19). He recognised also that both employers and employed are bound by God's laws regarding the patterns of work (Ex. 20:8-11). Work is not a dirty word, nor is there anything sub-Christian in working for another or in having other people working for you. What the Bible does condemn is laziness that lives off others (2 Thess 3:10), especially if it is done under the guise of 'spirituality'.

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There is nothing sub-Christian in recognising that people are different in physical, mental and spiritual capacity and therefore have different functions. Some hate to have responsibility, usually because they cannot handle it and it costs them too much. Others make an excellent second in-command but would be disastrous as leaders, and it would be wrong to require them to be or do what is not really theirs to be and do. Others again have the capacity to lead and organise work and in so doing become a benefit to others as well as themselves. This service and

leadership will always be there by human choice as well as by social necessity but there must, be safeguards. To have too many 'chiefs' and not enough 'Indians' is a. prescription for disaster. Or again, if one person, group of people, or race is stronger than another, and uses that strength for selfish advantage so that the weaker is robbed of its dignity and humanity, then the issue will be bitter chaos stretching over generations, as history testifies. At the same time in all relationships, including business ones, we are not allowed to change the rules half way through the game and once agreement has been made as to terms of service there is a moral obligation. Jesus' words in Matt. 20:1-16 are very enlightening. But even when there is an accepting of the system, as both John the Baptist and Paul made plain in Lk. 3:10-14 and 1 Cor. 7:20-24, there is still plenty of room and opportunity to change the system not necessarily by legislation, which is largely impotent in the face of fallen and rebellious human nature, but by the work of grace in human hearts, expressed in the context of relationships by a completely new attitude to people as people, and to life as lived unto God.

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17-20

It would help our social and political thinking a great deal, and it would thin the fog of much ecclesiastical pronouncement, if we would recognise that it is 'in Christ' that we are 'sons of God' and that distinctions are cancelled out. Things that are natural and possible in Christ are unnatural and impossible in the realm of fallen human nature. This is why the philosophy of humanism is becoming demonstrably untenable because ineffective. In Christ and in the body of Christ which is His church, we are members one of another in such a way that mutual dependence and ministry are inevitable. Read 1 Cor. 12:12ff and thrill to it, especially those whose past experience has demoralised them into a bondage of inferiority. The man or woman in Christ has no inferiority, and no one has the right to treat another in any way that is unworthy in the workaday world. But in these verses Paul is concerned that right relationships should be maintained and should operate within the fellowship of the church where master and slave would now be sitting at the same Lord's Table. There are many dangers here, psychological as well as spiritual. James 2:1-13 indicates that the New Testament church was not unaware of them. Servants might presume on masters who were fellow Christians and expect privileges the rest of the staff did not get. Masters might presume on Christians by paying them less than was right and expecting extras of time and tolerance that others would not stand for. Some who have authority, power and place in the business world take it for granted that they will have the same in church, and some who are held down at work or at home seek to assert themselves in the spiritual realm. The heart is deceitful (Jer, 17:9) and needs the constant correction, instruction and encouragement of the Word of God.

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17-20

Here is a clear word as to how we should receive each other in church. Treat others as true partners in the Lord. Receive them just as you would hurry to speak to Paul or to Jesus if they walked in through the door. *They* would not be left to sit in a pew alone, nor to fend for themselves if they had no place to go for lunch, nor would they have to go from group to group hoping someone would speak to them. (Someone had to do that in the church hall in Sandyford the week before this note was written!) It is likely that Paul's urging of Philemon to do the right and gracious thing had more to do with Onesimus' fear and demoralisation than with the master's unwillingness. Perhaps the slave's sense of guilt about his wrongdoing, together with the underlying insecurity and emotional sensitivity resulting from years of being a slave with no real identity or freedom, had made the man so devalued in his own feelings that he just could not believe that restoration and acceptance could ever be his. Such people must be shown that they are cared for by their fellows as well as by God and here is another realm of service for us Sunday by Sunday. Do we not sing in the hymn 'Rescue the perishing' of being 'touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness.'? This is evangelism by actions of love. We must help one another to believe the love God has for us (1 John 4:16).

17-20

Paul does not ignore the fact that Philemon has been wronged and has possibly lost financially because of his slave's stealing. Justice requires that restitution be made and since a slave was not likely to have any money. Paul pledges himself to discharge the debt. There is something here we need to consider well. Too often when we have wronged someone we make our confession to the Lord and seek His pardon. This is right and proper, but it does not absolve us from making restitution to the person we have wronged so far as it is in our power to do so. For example, if we have told lies about someone behind his back we must not go to *him* and tell him what we have done, for he may know nothing about it and we simply add to the sin and the hurt. We must go to the person to whom we have told the lies and confess what we have done and so seek to quench the stream of untruth against an innocent person. Christianity is very practical. But Paul goes on further. He sets the debt he now owes Philemon over against the debt Philemon owes him, namely his conversion, a spiritual debt that can never really be repaid. Do you think Philemon ever claimed the money from Paul? Some suggest there is a hint here pointing to the parable in Matt. 18:21-35. Certainly in 1 Cor. 9:8-12 Paul makes the principle very clear. There are obligations arising out of spiritual blessing. It seems in v.20 that Paul is really pleading that there will be profit for all concerned if the will of God is done in this matter.

21-22

Note Paul's last plea in v.20. Happy are those who have friends in Christ who can indeed refresh their hearts. Is Paul expressing a need here saying that in the midst of demanding service freely given, he longs for some gracious response to his influence, ministry and appeal that will lift him up and send him on his way rejoicing? We assume far too readily that preachers are self-sufficient. They can often be very lonely people who seldom are at the receiving end of encouragement except from the Lord. But Paul does not allow personal matters to divert him from the main spiritual issue in hand. He expresses confidence in his friend Philemon, and there are two things here that we must note carefully. We must have confidence in those who have proved themselves to be faithful and to hold to that confidence until there are overwhelming grounds for doubting it. If this was done a vast volume of petty criticism would be quenched at source. Too many talebearers have done hellish work with their tongues (Jas. 3: 1-12) and too many people have ears that are only too glad to hear denigrating reports of other people and their work. The second thing is that confidence should be expressed, not only by way of encouragement, but also to inspire and challenge others to rise to their best capacities. Think of how Paul inspired Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3-8; cf. Phil. 1: 6-8; 1 Thess. 5:23-25, Acts 20:32). Over against that think of how often our words or lack of them have the effect of demoralising people and causing them to be cast down so that they lose heart and settle down into a life far short of what they could be.

21-22

Paul is not flattering Philemon but is appealing to that generosity of spirit which is the mark of true growth in grace. We all tend to be a bit like the elder brother of the prodigal, carefully exact, doing what is required of us, but never showing that expansiveness of heart that was shown by the Father (Luke 15:20-24). The Lord loves the person who gives of himself cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7) and such a person will never be straitened or inhibited even though he may at times be taken advantage of (2 Cor. 6:11-12; Prov. 11: 24-25). It is the legalistic man, who is always calculating, always keeping himself clear in terms of the strict requirement of rules, who becomes a Pharisee, preoccupied with the minute details but forgetting the larger issues of love and grace (Matt. 23:23-24). It is not quite clear in this letter just what is the 'more' that Paul expects. Is he really pleading for the slave to be made a free-man rather than just reinstated to his job and former status? If so, this is the nearest Paul comes to making a specific, yet unofficial, move to abolish slavery. Is Paul asking that Onesimus be sent back to him for

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further Christian service? Whatever the meaning, it is clear that the converted slave is now to be considered and valued as a person in his own right. This does not mean he is free to kick over the traces, to abandon all responsibility, to refuse to work and to indulge in that form of sheer selfishness that is often mistaken for liberty. He is free to make himself a slave of Jesus Christ, and in Christ to make himself a slave and a servant to all men, as Paul and our Lord Jesus were (1 Cor. 9:19-23; Matt. 20:28), This is the service that is perfect freedom.

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21-22

There is something sincere and simple about Paul's request that the spare bedroom might be prepared for him. Amongst other things he wants to make it quite plain that he has no desire to create a confrontation situation with his good friend Philemon. He has spoken of 'obedience' (21) which he has an apostolic right to expect, but he does not 'lord it' over his brother. He is appealing, not charging or requiring and, even though the issue of the slave is not settled, Paul still hopes that a long prayed for visit to the home of Philemon will take place. When it does there is to be no atmosphere of tension. At the same time Paul is in no doubt that his visit will be a blessing and a benefit to that household of believers. He says the same kind of thing in Rom. 1:8-15, adding the note of mutual benefit. Paul never thought of himself as self-sufficient. That is one reason why he always appealed for people's prayers, and why he was so willing to make open acknowledgment of the debt he owed to so many. Fellowship is always two sided, and that fellowship is spoken of here in terms of hospitality. This was a very real part of Christian service and fellowship in a day when there was much travel. Paul felt free to ask hospitality and felt sure it would not be denied. Significant references to hospitality are Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13: 2; 1 Pet. 4:9. But there were also safeguards, for it is no part of Christian stewardship and kindness to support and make provision for those who, under the guise of 'living by faith', are simply 'living off' other people. Consider 2 Thess. 3:6-15 and 2 John 10. These are strong words but Christian grace is no charter for laziness. Work is a creation ordinance and a means of grace (Gen. 3:19). In the end no-one 'lives by faith' for all provision is made as the result of hard work on someone's part. We must never take kindness for granted, and gratitude is acceptable to God and to man.

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23-24

Names are fascinating because they remind us that the great characters of Scripture were men and women just like ourselves (Jas. 5:17). We studied recently the list of names in 2 Tim. 4:9-15, 19-21, and there is a list in Col. 4:7-17 very similar to this one. (Those who have followed these notes for a little time will have had a detailed study of most of these names in the Notes on 2 Timothy.) The references to Epaphras are in Col. 1:7 and 4:12 and it seems he was the evangelist to and the founder of the churches in Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. He obviously kept in touch with Paul over a long spell. Aristarchus is spoken of in Acts 19:29; 20:4; and 27:2 as a fellow traveller with the apostle. In Col. 4:10 he is a fellow prisoner of war and it is suggested by some that he took turns with Epaphras in voluntary imprisonment in order that the apostle might have company, support and assistance. If that be so, these two men give evidence of dedication of an astonishing degree, and we can imagine the tenderness of heart with which Paul would mention their names at the end of this letter to another valued brother and helper. Such was the holy fellowship between these men, and such was their individual and corporate commitment to the cause of Christ, that it is almost inevitable that the Devil must have tried to disrupt their harmony. Think of how in the gospels Peter seemed to envy John's closeness to Jesus and how all the disciples argued about who was 'furthest in' with Jesus (Mark 9:33-35). Sad to say it is not unknown among Christians that they play off one friend against another and this is a sign of deep insecurity. True beneficial closeness between people is possible only to the extent to which these people want to be and keep themselves close to Jesus.

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Paul ends his letter as he began it (3) with a benediction of grace. All is of grace. Our salvation is the work of God's grace and all the progress we have made, all the fruit we may have produced, all the friends we have gained and all the blessings we have received are from God's free and abundant and unfailing grace. Consider 1 Cor. 4:6-7; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; 2 Cor. 12:1-10; Eph. 2:4-8; 3:7-8; 4:7; 1 Tim. 1: 12-16; Heb. 4:16; Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 3:7; 5:5,10; 2 Pet. 3:18. Take your concordance and look up the lists of references to the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then remember that there are 'grace words' that do not contain the word 'grace', for forgiveness, regeneration, repentance and salvation are all involved as is the wonderful thought of the love of God, which is commended to us in the fact that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). The grace that saved us is the grace that keeps us and also enables us to perform all that we are called to be and do as the children of God. The whole of our story is concerned with 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners' (Bunyan), and Paul speaks of it here not just, in terms of Philemon for the word 'your' is plural. It is grace for the whole church in all its life, fellowship and service. It is indeed amazing grace, and having brought us thus far, with many, many blessings, that grace will see us through to the end, to the glory of God.

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