

A Plea for a Slave

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[0 : 00] it's not often that we hear the whole of one of the books of the Bible read in church, but it seems like a good idea.

So maybe next week we'll do Jeremiah, and the week after all the Psalms. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word now.

We know that you've caused all the Holy Scriptures to be written for our benefit, to make us wise for salvation and to equip us for every good work. So we pray that you work those things in our hearts and minds, and we pray this for Jesus' sake.

Amen. One of my favourite authors is John Steinbeck, the writer of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which I consider a magnificent book, and others like *The East of Eden* and *To a God Unknown*, are lots of books that have theological themes in them as well as being beautifully written.

One of the things by Steinbeck that I particularly enjoyed reading some years ago was a large volume of his letters. It's one thing to read an author's, in a sense, statements through their books, but it was another thing to read his letters and to get a sense of the person and his life, his angers and frustrations, his loves and torments and so on.

[1 : 28] I quite like reading history and I quite like reading biography, but there's always something additionally good in reading old letters. For example, I've read about Gallipoli, having been there two or three times.

There's a volume published you might have seen in the bookshops in the last two or three years called *The Gallipoli Diaries*, some of which were diary entries or letters, in effect, back home by people serving on the Gallipoli Peninsula during the months of 1915.

So it's one thing to read about that history, but it's another thing to, in a sense, get inside the eyes of somebody who's actually experiencing it firsthand and not necessarily reading about the events from the retrospect that we look at things from.

I remember reading a book about the beginning of Melbourne by Tim Flannery, the sort of famous, I'm not sure, he's a sort of polymath, really, academic in South Australia.

And part of the beauty of that book about the beginning of Melbourne was, again, not really the retrospective, because it was actually a collection of excerpts of letters, diary entries, original newspaper reports and so on from 1830s through to 1901 about Melbourne.

[2 : 47] Not so much a history written from now, but capturing the eyes from the inside. Well, reading people's letters can be a very revealing exercise, not that I'm advocating that you go and steam open the letters of your next-door neighbour's letterbox and things like that.

But there's something intriguing about entering into someone else's life and seeing it through their eyes, not from 2,000 years looking back, but in this case looking within Paul's eyes at a very personal correspondence between him and a fellow Christian called Philemon.

Most of the letters of the New Testament, whether by Paul or Peter or others, are in a sense making theological statements explicitly. And though we capture a little personal glimpse here and there in the last chapters of Romans and the last paragraphs of some of the other letters, you know, pass on my greetings to this person and that person and don't forget to bring my scrolls and parchment and cloak and that sort of thing.

This is one letter that inner self by itself is at a simply everyday personal level. It's not making a grandiose theological statement, although there's theology embedded in it, but in many ways it's a sort of everyday letter.

In that sense it stands out a little bit oddly, one might say, compared to the other letters and documents of the New Testament. It's not a letter to a church so much as to an individual, although it's not unique in that either.

[4 : 19] Another attractive feature of this letter, Philemon, is the little bit of detective work that we need to do in a sense to understand the context. I mean, it's not hard detective work, but there is nonetheless some of that.

We get a feeling that Philemon is a wealthy man. His wife most likely is Apphia, mentioned in verse 2. Probably Archippus might be his son, although we're not certain about that.

So therefore the greeting is to Philemon predominantly, but as we would write letters, you know, say hello to your wife and children as well. That's perhaps what's being said in verse 2 as well. The sense of him being wealthy comes from a couple of things. One is the church meets in their home. The your house is probably Philemon rather than Archippus.

It's probably, I mean, they probably live in the same house anyway. And to have a home which would be the house for the church meant probably that you were on the wealthier side.

[5 : 23] That is, you're probably not in a tiny house where there'd be no room to invite others. It's not that you'd be a big church building like this, but probably you'd be looking at a few dozen people who might gather and therefore probably the wealthier people would be the hosts of a church.

And also it's clear from this letter that Philemon owned a slave, at least one, who is in effect the subject of this letter. Philemon, we also know, lived in Colossae.

We know that from the fact that the letter to the Colossians refers to him in Colossians 4 and to Archippus in the end of Colossians chapter 4. This letter most likely traveled with the letter to the Colossian church as well.

And Colossae is in Turkey. It's probably about 100 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, from Ephesus in a direct route. It's in a valley near the town of Laodicea, which is actually mentioned in the letter to the Colossians, and near Hierapolis, which is also relatively close.

These days Colossae has nothing really of note. It's quite a difficult place to find. I remember the first time I went I was in a hired car with a friend and we got quite lost driving around these rural roads and eventually, to a man who spoke no English, worked out where it was.

[6 : 46] And it's just a hump of a field and a few old bits of pillars, and that's about it that's there. Nothing much to see these days. The other thing that seems apparent is that the slave Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, has run away.

We assume that. It looks like it. Some speculate that he probably took money with him when he ran away, and that's not improbable, although, again, we're not told that explicitly.

In verse 18, for example, I'm writing this, if he, Onesimus, has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account, which may imply that Onesimus perhaps stole some money in order to get his fare to run away.

Paul, at this time, is most likely in Rome, he's certainly in prison. Most likely that's in Rome. He was in prison at Caesarea as well in what is now Israel-Palestine area, but probably this is to Rome.

So that's a fair distance to go from Western Turkey through to Rome, and no doubt you would need some money to get a fare to do that. Onesimus, the slave, probably wasn't a very good slave.

[8 : 01] We're told in verse 11, for example, that he was fairly useless in the past to you, which is maybe a pun on his name because the name Onesimus means useful, but probably it suggests that he wasn't much of a slave.

He might have been a lazy person, unreliable, untrustworthy, and apparently the slaves from Phrygia, and he may have come from there because his name sits comfortably with the names from the area of Phrygia, they were notorious for being unreliable and untrustworthy.

So maybe he was really quite useless, although oddly had a name that meant useful. Paul is imprisoned in Rome, and somehow Onesimus ends up with Paul in Rome.

He may have met Paul in the past, although we're not actually told that Paul ever went to Colossae. We're not sure how Philemon was converted. It may have been in one of the other towns that Paul had been, in Iconium or Derbe or maybe in Ephesus and other places.

We know, of course, wealthy people would have traveled, especially for trade. Maybe, therefore, Philemon's become a Christian through that. Maybe Onesimus has heard about Paul and so finds him in prison in Rome.

[9 : 15] Again, there's elements of speculation there, but we know that he ends up in Rome with Paul in prison, not himself a prisoner, and Onesimus there through Paul becomes a Christian.

In verse 10, we read, I'm appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I've become during my imprisonment. That probably doesn't mean just simply I've looked after him as his sort of

guardian, but he's become my child in a spiritual sense is the most likely way of reading that. So through Paul's ministry in Rome, it seems that Onesimus has become a Christian. When you're a prisoner, Paul was perhaps under house arrest. He could have had visitors. He would have had visitors. And indeed, in prisons in those days, you depended upon friends and contacts for feeding you and looking after you in prison. Prisons didn't provide food like they do these days.

Paul may not have been in a great big prison like Barwon or Pentridge or something. It may have been, as I say, in relative house arrest. And maybe even Onesimus has become like his servant in that house looking after him while Paul is under this sort of house arrest.

[10:27] There's one key issue that is driving this letter, but we have to go all the way to verse 17 before we get to it. And we'll come to it later.

But I want to point that out first because Paul doesn't sort of jump in and say, now this is why I'm writing to you. He slowly, carefully, and rather tactfully builds up to the request, which only comes in verse 17.

Before that actual request is made, there's a sense in which, in a sense to put it badly, he's trying to butter Philemon up to agree to the request. I think it's a little bit better than that.

He's actually giving a context within which Philemon recognizes that he will agree to the request of verse 17. But it takes some effort intact to persuade Philemon, it seems.

And so there's quite a preamble to the request that comes in verse 17. So keep that in mind as we look through the verses leading up to verse 17.

[11:30] It's all building up to that point. The opening paragraph is the standard greetings and then follows the standard thanksgiving that you find in most of the letters of the New Testament.

Paul remembers Philemon in his prayers. He thanks God for him. He highlights a couple of particular things for which he thanks Philemon. And these are things that no doubt were true and no doubt are highlights of Philemon's Christian character.

But more than that, they are actually setting the groundwork for making the request later. So in verse 5, he gives thanks because I hear of your love and your faith.

Your love for all the saints. We shouldn't take that lightly. That is for other Christians. Any Christian is a saint. It's not especially the sort of Mother Teresa type figures.

Each and every Christian is a saint. It's language that we've actually distorted and perverted, I think, in the last 2,000 years since the scriptures were written and maybe language that we should recover. So maybe over supper tonight, we call each other saints, St. Doug and St. Paul and St. Jordan and so on.

[12:42] That is, that's the way Christians were. They are saints. And his love is for all the saints. It's not just a selective love, but he was known for his, it seems, love for each and every of the saints without distinction, perhaps is behind that.

As well as that, his faith towards God. So love and faith together, feeding each other in one sense. Certainly his faith in God is showing itself in his love for all the saints.

But then he prays for him in verse 6. And again, we've got to see this prayer as leading up to the request that comes later. I pray that the sharing of your faith, we might say the fellowship of your faith, or even the generosity of your faith, may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

He's already expressing his love. In effect, the prayer is that he does that more and more generously for those, so that as he sees, the good it will do for others.

And then Paul adds in verse 7, I've indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

[13:57] That's a great statement, I think, of encouragement back to Philemon for the effectiveness of his love towards all the saints. Paul is saying how much joy and encouragement he has received because he knows how many other hearts have been refreshed through Philemon's love for them.

It's a very generous statement of Paul in a way. We're not told the details of that love in verses 6 and 7, but it's ultimately refreshed Paul in effect.

He's received joy and encouragement knowing that others have benefited from that. And later on we'll see the same expression in verse 20 that Paul wants his heart refreshed in Christ through Philemon as well.

That is, he's laying the foundation for the request. He's making the, setting out the context in a sense to win Philemon over to agree to the request that's coming later in the letter. Notice though that Paul's encouragement at seeing other people benefit from Philemon's ministry. It's an indirect encouragement to Paul.

[15 : 13] It's not Philemon necessarily directly to Paul. It's Philemon refreshing the hearts of others and Paul seeing that and himself having joy and encouragement. And sometimes when we see others ministering to a third party, it's worth asking ourselves, are we filled with joy and encouragement when we see that happen?

When we see people within our Christian networks, whether it's in church or extended Christian networks, when we see them serving others, are we encouraged by that?

Are we filled with joy by that? Or does it perhaps make us jealous or resentful or something like that? It ought not. For love rejoices in what is good. And Paul is expressing that I think in a very good and challenging way sometimes to us as well.

Well, Paul has great confidence here in Philemon's character, his love for all the saints and that's the basis for his appeal that's coming.

That's why he says in verse 8, for this reason, because of your faith in towards God and your love for all the saints, for this reason, I'm going to ask you something.

[16 : 25] But he doesn't just ask now either. We're only at verse 8. There's still a few more verses before we get to the request. Paul is going to gradually build up to that request.

And notice then that the next thing he does, he says, I could actually command you to do this thing, which I've yet to ask you but it's coming. But I'm not going to command you because what I, in effect, want from you is voluntary response.

I want your consent personally and willingly out of the love that's in your character. I don't want you to do this as a reluctant obedience and yet he's not yet told Philemon what it is.

But I actually want you as an expression of love to do what I'm going to ask later. So he says in verse 8, for this reason, that is because of Philemon's love, though I'm bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.

And I, Paul, do this as an old man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. That is on the basis of love. Philemon, you're a person who is known for your love for all the saints and on the basis of your character and action of love, I'm going to make an appeal to you.

[17 : 45] I'm not going to do it as a command, but I'm going to appeal to your loving nature and your loving action. We've still got to get to the actual request.

In verse 14, we get the same sort of idea. I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your good deed, and he's yet to be told at this point what that good deed will be, that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

That's the same idea as in verses 8 and 9. I want you to respond with voluntary love, not by reluctant compulsion and obedience. Now he mentions at least the fact of the request.

In general terms, it's concerning Onesimus. Verse 10, I'm appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I've become during my imprisonment.

It implies, as I said before, that Onesimus has become a Christian. It may well be the first news that Philemon has had of Onesimus, his slave, who's run away.

[18 : 52] We don't know that, of course. It's speculation. But he may not have known anything of Onesimus once he left. There wouldn't be quick emails. You know, Paul wouldn't have emailed him a few days before saying, Onesimus has arrived at my doorstep.

That is, postal services were so slow that there may well have been no communication about Onesimus to this point. We just don't know. So it may be quite a shock as Philemon reads this to think, Onesimus, and maybe that's why Paul is taking such care and time to build up the argument before he makes his request later in verse 17.

Again, the content of the appeal is not yet declared. Just the subject of it is Onesimus, the slave. And notice how Paul expresses his great affection for Onesimus.

In verse 10, he calls him my child. As I said, probably a spiritual term to reflect the fact that Paul's the one who's led him to faith in Christ. In verse 12, he says, I am sending him, Onesimus, that is my own heart.

It's an amazingly affectionate and intimate term for Onesimus. That is Paul saying, he's my own heart. There's real a bond of affection that's developed between the two.

[20 : 06] And in verses 11 and 13, we get a sense of the value of Onesimus to Paul, maybe ministering to him in prison as an old man. Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

And then in verse 13, I wanted to keep him with me so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel. Paul obviously is receiving some benefit from this man who is perhaps looking after Paul in hospital along with other people as well who are mentioned at the end of the letter.

It's a striking thing to see this affection. Remember that Paul was a notable, highly educated Jewish Pharisee originally.

Onesimus is a runaway Gentile slave, a low caste person really. So here you have the Jew-Gentile barrier bridged and the upper class, lower class barrier bridged.

It ought not to surprise us between Christian brothers and sisters, but here it is. terms of absolute endearment and affection expressed across those socio-economic borders.

[21 : 24] There were such big divides then, even more than they are perhaps today. That's what Christian faith does. It brings together people of every race, every class, every caste, every difference, socio-economically speaking, racially speaking, brings us together as equal brothers and sisters in Christ.

Well, still St. Paul hasn't yet fully developed his argument before stating the request that this letter is all about. he goes on having talked about Onesimus implying that he's run away seems to be the case before he even gets to the request he now gives it a bit of a theological framework that's a bit bigger than this man is a runaway slave.

Verse 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while assuming that that implies that he ran away so that you might have him back forever.

That's an astonishing thing forever because forever means forever not just even permanently. It's bigger than that and maybe therefore it's the significance of verse 15 is that he's back as a Christian and therefore you're in an eternal relationship with him.

The language of verse 15 reminds me of the language of Esther chapter 4 where Mordecai says to Esther perhaps it is for a time such as this that you've been made queen and these things are going to happen.

[23 : 02] That is bad things happen runaway slave persecution the Jews in the book of Esther but behind it all is the sovereign hand of God who brings good out of evil and so Paul is actually in order to in a sense soften Philemon up to agree to the request that's yet to come still he's trying to help him see that maybe the divine hand of God is behind this it's not just a disobedient slave but maybe in God's economy Onesimus ran away as a useless slave and a non-Christian and he's now converted and useful and so he'll be back with you forever so we see the big hand of God behind the events of the world that may in some ways look bad may in some ways look inexplicable but God as always brings good out of them not only does he come back as a slave but also as a brother verse 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave a beloved brother especially to me but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord not that Onesimus is coming back not as a slave he's coming back as more than a slave still a slave but also a Christian brother one final argument is made before the actual request

Paul's been laying down this context of affirming Philemon's love for all the saints and on the basis of that love he says I'm not going to command you this I'm going to appeal to you on the basis of love and then he talks about how important Onesimus has become to him he talks about this hand of God behind it perhaps perhaps for this reason one more thing to say before the request verse 17 if you consider me your partner your fellow worker or your fellow Christian really that is on the bounds of Paul Philemon relationship because it's me Paul writing to you Philemon my brother my partner in the gospel my fellow Christian that is it's not just somebody unknown to you writing it's me Paul writing to you Philemon now all the arguments now being set for the actual request and finally it comes in the second half of verse 17 simply welcome him well it's a lot of build up isn't it to say welcome him yes it goes on to say welcome him as you would welcome me so it's a particular character of welcome that is it's to be a warm welcome

I expect that's what Paul would have expected if he arrived on Philemon's doorstep but simply it is welcome him it's the heart of the letter it's so hard why so much build up towards that request why does Paul take so much care and tact in all the language and words and prayers and thanksgivings leading up to this request why didn't he just start at the beginning of verse 4 having said grace to

you and peace from God our father and the lord Jesus Christ welcome Onesimus who's coming with this letter welcoming a repentant sinner who's wronged you is not always easy to do whether or not he stole money to escape he left his master he broke the law it may look straightforward to say welcome him but it's probably more challenging than that you see when we're wronged as Philemon had been it is very easy to look for satisfying vengeance and punishment and our sinful human natures cry out for that we want some payback we've been put out and so we want someone else to suffer we want the joy of exercising vengeance or punishment often our pride you see prevents us from forgiving someone or showing mercy to them

Paul says welcome him that's actually a rich word welcome him would mean forgive him accept him love him take him back in don't show him revenge or vengeance but welcome him as you would welcome me Paul no easy task Paul could have commanded it as he said back in verse 8 but instead he's labored tactfully to show a sort of theological underpinning for the request so that the response of Philemon will be willing and voluntary in its expression of love there's perhaps a bit more to it than that too in verse 3 in the greeting which is relatively standard for a Christian letter of the New Testament Paul says grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ grace of course is undeserved mercy and peace is its result our relationship with God through mercy Philemon has been a recipient of God's mercy and enjoys peace with God as a result Onesimus has come to receive the same mercy and peace through Paul's ministry in Rome in prison but just as Philemon a sinner like any person has received mercy from God and thus peace so in effect is his welcome of Onesimus to be a reflection of such mercy and peace welcome him show him the grace that God's already extended to you and God has extended to Onesimus as well as you've been forgiven by God forgive him and welcome him and as Paul in that prayer in verses 4 through to 6 or 7 has reflected on Philemon's character of love that is so evident in effect his request is that Philemon does indeed more and more show his love specifically to Onesimus that's the fulfillment really of the prayer of verse 6 and just as

[29 : 42] Philemon's acts of love to other saints have refreshed their hearts and Paul has received joy and encouragement from them as verse 7 said in particular welcome Onesimus so that as Paul says my heart will be refreshed too verse 20 we may ponder why such a letter is in the New Testament presumably Paul wrote many personal letters and there are many that have been lost no doubt maybe there were some that were not included in the New Testament presumably Philemon heeded the request we have no way of being certain of that but I suppose if having seen Onesimus brought back and seen the letter from Paul and Onesimus of Philemon rather was still particularly angry with Onesimus for running away he probably would have torn up the letter and inflicted punishment as he subjected

Onesimus back to abject slavery who knows but having said that though this letter stands out for its sort of personal nature unlike so many of the other letters of the New Testament it does actually get to the very heart of the gospel welcoming Onesimus is no trifling matter it is an expression of the gospel God welcomes repentant sinners who have wronged him even more seriously than Onesimus has wronged Philemon we see Jesus teach this very same theme in many places in different ways the parable of the prodigal son in effect or the parable of the unforgiving servant the man who was forgiven much but refused to give little Philemon has been forgiven much he's received grace and mercy he's now being exhorted persuaded by Paul to forgive another as well when we're forgiven by God how much more are we to forgive those who wrong us of course Jesus taught the same theme also in the Lord's prayer Paul is on about here living the gospel and of all people Christians are to be the most forgiving and welcoming and yet so often we're not love keeps no record of wrongs and in effect the command or the exhortation rather to Philemon to welcome Onesimus is saying that your love for him is to keep no record of wrongs Paul says in verse 18 if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything charge that to my account but then notice that Paul says I Paul am writing this with my own hand I will repay it I say nothing about your owing me even your own life again probably a spiritual reflection that Philemon's faith came through Paul's ministry Paul says

I'll repay but just remember that if you're a Christian it's because of my ministry and there's a sense in which you owe me your very life to start with often commentators suggest that behind Paul's request in this letter lies an implicit selfish selfishness that is that Paul actually wants Onesimus back he's sending him to Philemon with his glowing commendation about his usefulness how important he is to him and he says about him in verse 21 confident of your obedience I'm writing to

you knowing that you will do even more than I say is that a suggestive hint that Philemon is to send him back to minister to Paul in Rome I don't think Paul is not wanting Onesimus to come back to him to look after him although he's actually sacrificing that luxury to send him back rightly to Philemon Paul is expecting to come out of prison through the answers to prayers whether he did or not we don't know so Paul is not acting selfishly in this he's rather commending an act of love that reflects the very heart of the gospel the heart of forgiveness and welcome he's acting for Philemon's benefit not for his own Philemon this letter of Philemon is often regarded as somewhat contentious because it doesn't condemn slavery Paul Paul is not urging to grant freedom he's not trying to overturn the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire it may be that verse 21 knowing that you'll do even more than I say may lead to Onesimus' freedom as a slave but I don't think that's what Paul has in mind rather just a royal welcome a great welcome and love as a fellow brother even though he's the slave and Philemon is the master we must remember that Roman slavery was a far cry from the sort of

[35 : 20] Afro American slavery of the 18th and 19th centuries that's sort of encapsulated in books like Uncle Tom's Cabin and so on Roman slavery was a bit more like household servants yes perhaps fewer rights but on the whole people were fairly well looked after as slaves in the Roman Empire and whilst there is this great argument that Christians rightly I think abolished slavery at least in the English Parliament in 1833 through great evangelical Christians such as William Wilberforce and others we have to also remember that around our world today there is slavery in more countries than there is not probably shocking conditions for many the New Testament indeed as the old doesn't actually formally condemn slavery as an institution that's not what this letter does either but Paul's appeal to welcome

Onesimus as a brother shows something more significant that Christian faith brings together in a sense equally those of all sorts of different races and socio economic classes well this little letter urges active Christian character that reflects the gospel in interpersonal relationships really it's not a grand theological treatise but it's a personal and rather poignant example of Christian love in action it's a letter urging one man to apply Christian grace in his relationship with his former runaway slave we may not have slaves but the application of living the gospel is clear that in all our relationships and not least when we have been wronged we are to act with the same sort of grace and forgiveness as God acts and extends to us not with reluctant compulsion but with voluntary love let's pray

Lord our God we thank you that you loved us in Christ and extended your grace and mercy to us in him for giving us our trespasses against you and we pray Lord God that as a result our lives may be characterized by love that bears no record of wrongs that forgives others as you've forgiven us that extends welcome to repentant sinners that seeks no vengeance but rather loves as you have loved us amen us we run Thank you.