

Blessed are the Merciful, for They Shall Receive Mercy: An Exegetical Overview of Philemon 18-20

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Contents

- Problems in the Passage (p. 1)
- The Social Aspects of Slavery (p. 2)
- The Literary/Historical Context (p. 4)
- Tracing Paul's argument (p. 6)
- Philemon 18-20: A Closer Look (p. 9)

Problems in the Passage

Philemon 18-20 is a particularly tantalizing passage in a most unusual epistle. Questions that have provoked protracted debate have arisen among these scant three verses. Within the limits of this brief exposition, we will examine only the most insistent of these, and attempt to propose the most satisfactory answers. While no new ground will be broken, perhaps a review of the pertinent discussions will give rise to deeper reflection, and to a new appreciation for even the seemingly mundane portions of God's Word.

The premier debate in this epistle centers around the issue of slavery as a social institution, and Christianity's impact on it. Specific issues of a practical nature quickly arise. In view of his imprisonment, how can Paul promise to repay any debt Onesimus has incurred? If Onesimus is manumitted on his return simply because he is a Christian, how will this affect the other slaves in Philemon's household? Why does Paul appear to use such an oblique approach with Philemon? What can we learn from this epistle?

Recognizing that not all of these questions bear equal import, we will allot discussion accordingly. But before we can adequately address any of these issues, we must get our historical bearings.

The Social Aspects of Slavery

“It is extremely hard to describe the conditions of slaves without becoming emotive and partisan, stressing one-sidedly either the benefits or disadvantages of being a slave.”¹ The quandary presented here by John Barclay is one I share, and his monograph does not improve the situation appreciably. While I gained much valuable information from Barclay, I fear that my own prejudice will color my presentation of the material.

Slavery was an accepted reality when Paul wrote his letter to Philemon. From a legal standpoint, this institution offered an intriguing dichotomy: while recognized as humans by birth, slaves were simultaneously considered property, and as such were subject to the whims of their masters. They could be disciplined without reason, isolated from their wives and children (and sold separately), required to provide sexual favors, even put to death if their owner so chose. Legal recourse was almost non-existent (we will examine a key exception later in this discussion). S. R. Llewelyn gives this bleak assessment: “In practice a slave’s productivity depended on a system of reward and punishment, the carrot and the stick.”²

In order to dispel the notion that slavery was unmitigated misery, a citation from Barclay provides a balanced perspective:

There are famous examples of cruel treatment recorded in classical literature, but also plenty of inscriptions witnessing to the warmth of feeling between some owners and their slaves.

In fact, the extremes are much less significant than the ordinary realities taken for granted by slaves and masters. Living in their master’s house at least

¹John M. G. Barclay, “Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave Ownership,” New Testament Studies 37 (1991): 166.

²S. R. Llewelyn, “The Sale of a Slave-Girl: The New Testament’s Attitude to Slavery,” in New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri published in 1980-81, (Adelaide: Macquarie, 1981), 50.

provided shelter for domestic slaves and, since they were a significant financial asset, it was in the master's interest to look after them.³

The mention of "domestic slaves" in the above quotation confronts us with an important distinction: slaves performed a multiplicity of tasks. Barclay gives a partial list:

We find slaves as janitors, cooks, waiters, cleaners, couriers, child-minders, wet-nurses and all-purpose personal attendants, not to mention the various professionals one might find in the larger and wealthier houses.⁴

This distinction becomes important when we consider the proximity of Onesimus to Philemon. As a domestic slave, he had ample opportunity to observe the change wrought in his master by the transforming power of God. This example on the part of Philemon appears to play a crucial part in the unfolding drama yet to come.

We need to define and discuss one other key term before we launch into an investigation of the passage, and that is the word "manumission." This word denotes the act of freeing a slave from slavery. Manumission was, with few exceptions, the goal of every slave. Freedom was usually obtained in one of two ways: either the master would simply allow the slave to go free as a public relations gesture, or he would extract a manumission price from the slave in exchange for the slave's liberty. Slaves often set aside funds for their eventual manumission price; some were even willing to trade their children for their independence.⁵

Even if slaves were freed without payment, this did not mean an absolute freedom. The system was still weighted to favor the master. Ongoing obligations were often required of the freedman. In essence, he remained a slave for a specified

³Barclay, 167.

⁴Barclay, 166.

⁵Barclay, 169.

period while not having the provision of room and board. Shrewd masters could gain quite an advantage from such a situation.⁶

The Literary/Historical Context

To understand the passage under consideration, we must examine it in context. The purpose of Paul's letter seems to be very simple. To borrow an outline from William Hendriksen, we can view Paul as writing this letter:

1. To secure forgiveness for Onesimus.
2. To strike at the very heart of slavery by tactfully requesting that, in accordance with the rule of Christ, love be shown to all, including slaves.
3. To provide for himself a place of lodging after his release from imprisonment.⁷

For a breakdown according to versification I am following the analysis of Peter T. O'Brien:

Vv. 1-3	Introductory Greeting
Vv. 4-7	Thanksgiving and Intercession for Philemon
Vv. 8-20	Paul's Plea for Onesimus
Vv. 21-25	Final Remarks and Greetings ⁸

⁶See Barclay, 169. He includes Roman law provisions for general duties (*obsequium*), and specific tasks (*operae*). He also mentions Greek *paramone*-contracts that had the power to restrict employment and movement for a specified period.

⁷William Hendriksen, Exposition of Colossians and Philemon, New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 27. Hendriksen's assertion that Paul is "[striking] at the very heart of slavery" is not shared by all scholars. Peter O'Brien states: "It is quite clear that in this letter Paul is not really dealing with the question of slavery as such or the resolution of a particular instance of slavery. In this verse [16], at least, he treats the question of brotherly love. Although Onesimus' earthly freedom may be of positive value, in the last analysis it is of no ultimate significance to him as a Christian as to whether he is slave or free. Finally what matters is to have accepted God's call and to follow him." Peter T. O'Brien, Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 44. (Waco: Word, 1982), 298.

⁸Peter T. O'Brien, Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 44. (Waco: Word, 1982), 285.

While examining the structure, or outline of the letter, we must also make note of the particular form Paul used. Different occasions called for different styles of correspondence. Because we are largely ignorant of the stylistic devices Paul used in many of his letters, we fail to appreciate fully the subtle genius he exhibited. His letter to Philemon demonstrates a skillful diplomacy unsurpassed in any of his other writings.

Philemon has been described as “a personal note,”⁹ and indeed it is. But we must not lose sight of the reminder of W. G. Kümmel that it is also, “like the longer letters of Paul . . . not private correspondence, but the instrument of early Christian missionary work.”¹⁰

Technically, one could classify this epistle as a “letter of recommendation.”¹¹ Craig Keener describes why such a letter was usually written: “This letter is . . . the sort that a patron wrote to social peers or inferiors on behalf of a dependent client to ask a favor for him.”¹² It also bears marks of deliberative rhetoric, “the type of speech or writing educated persons in antiquity used to persuade others to change their behavior or attitudes.”¹³ Thus we see that after giving greetings, Paul opened with an *exordium*, or appeal to Philemon (vv. 4-7). He then went on to present his main argument, consisting of proofs (vv. 8-16). He finished up with a *peroratio*, or summary (vv. 17-22). This method of argumentation would have been especially persuasive when addressed to a well-educated man like Philemon.¹⁴

⁹Luke Timothy Johnson, The Writings of The New Testament: An Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 351.

¹⁰Werner Georg Kümmel, ed., Introduction to the New Testament (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 249.

¹¹Craig S. Keener, The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 644. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, The Writings of the New Testament, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 351.

¹²Ibid., 644.

¹³Ibid., 644.

¹⁴Ibid., 644.

Tracing Paul's Argument

It is apparent that Paul is in the midst of a very delicate situation. He, through no fault of his own, finds himself harboring a fugitive. Not only is this fugitive a slave, but this slave belongs to one of Paul's dear friends and converts. He has little choice under Roman law; the slave must be returned. Paul, knowing the treatment that Onesimus could expect at Philemon's hands, attempts to mediate this dilemma. In vv. 1-3, he gives an introductory greeting with an interesting twist. He does not tout his apostleship. Rather, he calls himself δεσμιος Χριστου Ἰησου ("a prisoner of Christ Jesus"). His use of the genitive indicates that as a spokesman belonging to Jesus his letter is to be obeyed.¹⁵ This may have caused Philemon to give special attention to what followed.

The thanksgiving that came next was part of the *exordium* mentioned earlier. Keener states that "such *exordia* were commonly used in speeches to praise the hearers, thus securing their favor."¹⁶ Here again we see Paul the diplomat taking every opportunity to solidify his rapport with Philemon prior to presenting his request.

He repeats this technique in verse 7 when he compliments Philemon on his hospitality. Keener states, "Mention of a shared friendship . . . was especially important . . . when the writer was about to request a favor from the letter's recipient."¹⁷ Barclay sees this verse in a slightly different light. He feels that Paul's mention of Philemon refreshing the hearts of the saints "clearly prepares the way for Paul's request that Philemon now refresh his heart in Christ (v. 20) especially since Onesimus has earlier been described as Paul's own heart (v. 12, σπλάγγνα in each case)."¹⁸

¹⁵Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Philemon, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 189. Cf. Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 658.

¹⁶Keener, 645.

¹⁷Ibid., 645.

¹⁸Barclay, 171.

Either way, it seems that Paul is careful to start the letter with plenty of goodwill in anticipation of the delicate situation that follows. W. E. Oesterley has this to say about Paul's style: "Nothing could exceed the affectionate tactfulness displayed in the Epistle; the delicate way in which St. Paul combines the appeal to all that is best in Philemon with a gentle, yet distinct assertion of his own authority (see vv. 8, 9, 21) is very striking"¹⁹

Verse 8 is where Paul finally broaches the subject that prompted the letter, and here we see an intriguing grammatical point. Paul's use of the adverbial participle ἔχων ("having") is concessive; he admits that he could order Philemon to take Onesimus back as a brother, but he concedes the ultimate decision to Philemon.²⁰

Verse 10 is masterfully phrased. Note that the NASB is far superior here to the NIV, as it maintains the awkward word order that the force of Paul's sentence might be fully felt. He appeals to Philemon for his child that he begat in his imprisonment (building up a sense of sympathy), and only then does he name the object of his affection. Had he put Onesimus' name at the start of the sentence, the psychological effect would have been lost.

With the appearance of Onesimus' name, we are introduced to the issue of wordplay in this epistle. While realizing that this is not strictly a part of Paul's argument, one could scarcely write a paper on Philemon without mentioning it. The commentators are unanimous as to the meaning of the word *ὀνήσιμον* ("useful"); the disagreement centers around whether this is indeed a pun on Onesimus' name or not. Lohse²¹ and Lenski²² argue vigorously against it, Knox²³ and Johnson²⁴ are

¹⁹W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., The Expositor's Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), vol. 4, The Epistle to Philemon, by W. E. Oesterley, 207.

²⁰C. F. D. Moule, An Idiom Book Of New Testament Greek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 102.

²¹Lohse, 205.

²²R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937), 972.

²³John Knox, Philemon Among the Letters of Paul (London: Collins, 1960), 21.

just as eloquent in their support. Johnson goes on to find a pun in Paul's pre- and post-conversion descriptions of Onesimus (ἄχρηστον (“useless”) and εὐχρηστον (“useful”), respectively) and the title Χριστός (Christ).²⁵

Another pun mentioned by some is the use of σπλαγχνά (“inmost feelings, heart, affection”). Paul's commendation of Philemon for refreshing the σπλαγχνά of the saints is followed by his description of Onesimus with the same word (v. 12), the implication being that Paul expects similar treatment be extended to Onesimus. A rather clever rhetorical device, one intended to stir the emotions and erase any prejudice Philemon might harbor.

A measure of uncertainty surrounds verses 12-14. Is Paul requesting manumission for Onesimus, that he might return to Paul's side, or is he merely petitioning for a Christian response on Philemon's part when Onesimus arrives? (Barclay persuasively presents a third option: Paul's plea is too vague to be definitively identified.²⁶) Verses 15-16 would seem to argue for the second idea, especially when Paul tells Philemon that he might receive Onesimus αἰώνιον (“forever”). The use of the subjunctive (ἀπεχθῆς, “receive”), rather than causing doubt, actually strengthens this argument. Rienecker and Rogers describe this term: “The word was a commercial technical term meaning to receive a sum in full and give a receipt for it.’ Here the idea is to keep, to keep for one's self.”²⁷

While verse 17 has an uncertain feel to it in the English, the Greek is definite. Paul uses ἔχεις (“you have” [fellowship with me]) as a first-class conditional clause which, according to Rienecker and Rogers, “accepts the condition as a reality.”²⁸ Paul never really questions Philemon's love for him, and he leans heavily on their relationship for leverage. Having made his plea, he urges Philemon to act with compassion.

²⁴Johnson, 335.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Barclay, 170-175 passim.

²⁷Rienecker and Rogers, 660.

²⁸Ibid., 661.

Philemon 18-20: A Closer Look

Because these three verses are pivotal to the problem at hand, we will examine them more closely than the rest of the letter. Thankfully, there are no textual variants to deal with, so we can proceed right to exegesis.

The first, and perhaps most important question involves the issue of theft. Did Onesimus actually steal anything (money being the obvious item) from Philemon, or did he simply deprive Philemon of his labor, thereby causing Philemon a loss of the value of services rendered? Here again the commentators differ. Concerning verse 18, R. C. H. Lenski argues:

“Or” is not disjunctive but conjunctive. “Wronged thee in some respect” is one way of stating it, “or” is another, more specific way: “or owes” thee anything. The condition of reality assumes this as a fact. Yet the conditional form leaves it to Philemon to decide whether he, too, will consider that Onesimus did him a wrong and thus owes him the making good of that wrong.

The oftener we read this conditional clause, the less we can bring ourselves to accept the general interpretation which lays all the stress on the second verb and thus concludes that Onesimus stole some money from his master when he fled, and that he did this in order to enable him to flee or that he first stole and then fled for fear of detection and punishment. We ask ourselves how Paul could then write “if.” He should simply acknowledge the fact; Onesimus surely confessed his crime. Paul should ask pardon for Onesimus, nothing less.²⁹

Despite a diligent search, no other commentator could be found to corroborate Lenski’s view. In fact, Hendriksen specifically and convincingly refutes it. In answer to Lenski, he writes:

The apostle knew very well that any one traveling all the way from Colosse to Rome would need money. He also was not ignorant of the fact that lack of trustworthiness in matters relating to material things was characteristic of slaves...It is possible that Onesimus had told Paul that he had committed theft. More probable, it would seem to me, is the supposition that Paul was entertaining justifiable suspicions that such a wrong had been committed. This would account for the use of the significant two letter word *If* in verse 18. Paul was not sure, but suspected it!³⁰

²⁹Lenski, 968.

³⁰Hendriksen, 222. Italics in original.

The question of Paul's ability to reimburse Philemon still begs to be answered. Some commentators, seeing Paul as destitute nonetheless applaud his noble, albeit impotent offer.³¹ They tend to "spiritualize" Paul's offer, and thus sidestep the issue. Here again, Hendriksen presents what seems to be a perfectly plausible reason for Paul's generous gesture:

Had Paul come into an inheritance in recent years, that he was able to make this generous offer? On the basis of the fact that according to Acts 24:26 Felix detained the apostle, hoping that the latter would purchase his freedom; of Acts 28:30, which contains a reference to Paul's "own rented quarters"; and of the passage now under discussion, some have arrived at this conclusion. In any event Paul either had money or knew where he could get it. He was entirely sincere in offering compensation for the loss which Philemon might have suffered.³²

Hendriksen's argument seems bolstered by the fact that Paul stated he wrote this promise with his own hand, which would legally bind him to the offer if Philemon were to press the issue. Verse 19 is a strong statement: ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτισῶ· ἵνα μὴ λεγῶ σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις. Several interesting grammatical points need to be mentioned here. First, Paul uses the emphatic ἐγὼ ("I"). Lightfoot makes this observation: "The emphatic ἐγὼ identifies the cause of Onesimus with his own."³³ The presence of the epistolary aorist ἔγραψα (lit. "I wrote") has led some to conclude that Paul wrote this entire epistle himself, eschewing the use of an amanuensis due to its personal nature.³⁴

Paul chooses an interesting word in ἀποτισῶ (future active indicative of ἀποτινῶ). It means "I will repay, or pay back." Though it is a legal

³¹Lohse, 204. See also Alexander Maclaren, The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon (New York: Doran, n. d.) 479-482 passim.

³²Hendriksen, 222. Cf. Lewis B. Radford, The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon (London: Methuen, n. d.) 363.

³³J. B. Lightfoot, quoted in Oesterley, 216.

³⁴Oesterley, 216. See also J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Revised Text (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.)

technical term used in promissory notes,³⁵ it only appears here in the New Testament.

The ἵνα μη λεγω (“lest I should mention”) phrase is a deft use of *paraleipsis*.³⁶ This is a rhetorical device used to call attention to something by saying that you could mention it but choose not to do so. Paul is not so subtly reminding Philemon of the spiritual debt he owes the apostle in order to exert gentle pressure on him to forgive Onesimus. Having promised not only to return a now-useful Onesimus, but to rectify any losses incurred by his departure, Paul now expects an equally generous gesture on the part of Philemon.

The subtle pressure is continued in the use of the word *προσοφειλεις* (“owe besides”). F. F. Bruce makes this observation: “The prefix *προσ-* in *προσοφειλεις* may imply: over and above the debt I have mentioned (owed by Onesimus), there is another debt to which I could refer if I had a mind to . . .”³⁷

In verse 20 we once again see Paul’s use of *ὄναιμην* (“let me benefit”). The poignancy of the pun is doubled here; Paul is repeating two terms already used as synonyms for Onesimus’ name (*ὄναιμην*, *σπλαγχνα*), and asking Philemon to benefit Paul by extending the same grace to Onesimus that he would to Paul. Philemon would refresh Paul’s *σπλαγχνα* by his gentle treatment of one that Paul considered *ἐμα σπλαγχνα* (“my very heart”). Even now Paul is not demanding anything. We see *ὄναιμην* in the optative mood here, indicative of a wish.

We have already mentioned Paul’s rather oblique style throughout the letter. Whether this was done to spare the feelings of the persons involved is uncertain. Nonetheless, it leaves us with some unanswered questions. One of these is Paul’s intention for Onesimus. Did he return Onesimus to Philemon’s

³⁵Rienecker and Rogers, 661.

³⁶E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 484.

³⁷F. F. Bruce, ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) , The Epistle to Philemon, by F. F. Bruce, 220.

employ permanently, or was it Paul's desire to have him manumitted and returned to Rome? At first blush it would seem clear that Paul had no intention of keeping Onesimus. After all, he says that Philemon will have his slave back forever as a brother (vv. 15-16). Some commentators add Paul's request for a guest room as evidence that Paul will be coming to observe the relation between Philemon and Onesimus. It is unclear whether this has any bearing on Paul's desire.

Perhaps the most commonly cited argument revolves around verse 21, where Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do even more than is requested of him. F. F. Bruce's reasoning is representative of the majority:

Philemon had won a good reputation for refreshing the hearts of the saints (v. 7). Here he is presented with a rare opportunity for enhancing that reputation by refreshing Paul's heart as he alone can refresh it-by sending Onesimus back to him. If Philemon is Paul's "dear fellow-worker," then, as Theophylactus of Achrida commented nine centuries ago, "if dear, he will grant the favor requested; if a fellow-worker, he will not retain the slave, but send him back for the ministry of preaching, in which he himself also is a worker."³⁸

That sounds very noble, but John Barclay raises some valid questions of a practical nature. He questions Paul's statement in verse 16 where he encourages Philemon to take Onesimus back as "no longer a slave but beyond a slave, a brother beloved." Paul does not say "not only as a slave, but also as a brother"; he seems to imply with some force that Philemon will manumit Onesimus. So far Bruce's argument is supported by this reasoning. Barclay's difficulty comes when one imagines what would actually happen if Paul did so. He logically assumes several possible difficulties that might follow if Onesimus were manumitted on the basis of his claim to be a Christian: (1) A flood of spurious "conversions" would sweep Philemon's household with the hopes of a similar result. (2) In the case of genuine conversions, who would pay the manumission price? (3) Assuming that all of Philemon's slaves were genuinely converted, could he continue to maintain his ministry to the local church if he were bereft of domestic help? (4) assuming that Onesimus remained a slave, could he exercise such biblical injunctions as admonishing a

³⁸Bruce, 221.

brother who had fallen into sin, especially if that brother were his master? I would have to concur with Barclay in his final assessment: Paul recognizes the dilemmas inherent in the situation, and is handling it as best he can. He is not arguing for manumission; he is insisting on the imposition of the gospel on the culture. Rather than reacting to a bad situation, he is advocating a proactive stance. It is interesting to note that in his epistle to the Colossians (the home of Philemon), he insists on a renewal in which there is no distinction between Jew or Greek or between slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:11).

The fact that the letter to Philemon survived is frequently cited by commentators as evidence that Onesimus was indeed received back into his master's good graces. And grace seems to be the theme of the letter. Some see a similarity between the payment of Jesus on the cross and Paul's request that Philemon forgive Onesimus and give him the credit that he would assign to Paul. In the same way that Paul not only promised to pay a debt, but also to transfer merit, so Jesus did for us. Though the analogy is by no means perfect, there does seem to be a strong current of the practical effects of God's grace running through this epistle.

Writing this paper has certainly given me a whole new perspective on a portion of Scripture that in some sense I previously had considered to be relatively "insignificant." Paul's statement that "all Scripture is profitable" has been brought home forcefully to me.