

4 September 2022 Philemon Pastor Fraser Pearce

First: A note about the Gospel:

<https://www.bethlehemadelaide.org.au/assets/documents/2016-sermons/Sermon-20160904.mp3>

Let's get straight into the Letter (p.167 in your pew Bibles): **Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

So: St Paul writing as someone *under arrest* for proclaiming the Gospel;

He is writing from a *team ministry* situation;

He is writing especially to *Philemon*,

A person who has come to the faith

Through the ministry of St Paul.

St Paul is about to write a highly personal letter,

And he's writing it into a highly charged situation:

Evidently Philemon's slave, Onesimus, has run away,

Only after stealing from his master.

St Paul is writing on behalf of Onesimus

Who has become a Christian through St Paul's ministry

While St Paul has been imprisoned.

We're about to find out what it meant for St Paul

When he wrote in Galatians: **As many of you as were baptized into Christ**

have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek,

there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all

of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3

Listen to how he starts: **When I remember you in my prayers, I always**

thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith

towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become

effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have

indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because

the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

Did you notice how personal all this is?

St Paul thanks God for Philemon,

For his life of love for his Christian brothers and sisters,
For his life of faith in the Lord Jesus.
He tells Philemon that he prays for him,
And gives the content of his prayers,
And tells Philemon of the joy and encouragement
He has received through the community-building love
That Philemon has shown.

Now St Paul is going to move toward the purpose of his letter.

There is nothing hidden or deceitful

In what St Paul is about to write,

But it is bold, even laugh out bold:

For this reason, though I am 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.

St Paul is saying he could pull rank: he could *command*,

But he'd rather *appeal to* or persuade Philemon to act in a way

That's consistent with his profession of the Christian faith.

So, St Paul draws attention to the fact that he is an 'old man'

Really, it seems, that he is an 'elder'

Suggesting that he deserves due respect and consideration.

He also draws attention to the fact that he is in prison

For the faith, while Philemon is free.

Now St Paul gets to the point: It's an appeal for this runaway slave

Whom St Paul has fathered in the faith,

And St Paul makes a bit of a pun: The name 'Onesimus' means 'useful.'

Now let's pause here: How would Philemon have felt hearing this news?

The law is on Philemon's side:

He could legally exact punishment and revenge.

It seems St Paul knows how Philemon could have felt,

So he stands up for Onesimus by putting himself in the picture:

By making Philemon's reaction to Onesimus

Also a reaction to St Paul, and to Jesus himself.

Listen to what St Paul writes: **I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 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; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.**

Onesimus is not simply a runaway slave: *He is St Paul's own heart.*

More than this, St Paul gives a strong recommendation

Of Onesimus' work ethic,

And more than this, he assumes that Philemon has a sort of debt

To St Paul, that could be paid through Onesimus' service

On Philemon's behalf.

But St Paul does not want to demand, but to persuade,

So he goes on: **Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.**

Here's a sort of Gospel persuasion:

Look how God took this bad situation: fleeing and theft,

And turned it to not only Onesimus' salvation

But to their new relationship as brothers in Christ.

You can see how St Paul is appealing to Philemon's faith.

St Paul then puts himself right into the situation: **So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

He's saying: Philemon: We are fellows in promoting the Gospel, aren't we?

You love and respect me, don't you?

Then welcome Onesimus just as you welcome me.

The unsaid corollary: if you reject him, you reject me.

And if you reject me, you reject the one who sent me.

To sweeten the deal, St Paul goes on: **If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.**

St Paul guarantees that he'll settle any financial issue,

In fact he steps in to write with his own hand

(rather than have a scribe take dictation):

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.

But then listen to what he says next

I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

This should raise a smile:

I won't mention that you owe your salvation to me...

Well, Philemon now has the chance to do St Paul a good turn

St Paul concludes: **Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.**

St Paul is saying: Philemon you have the chance to help me out,

And I'm confident that you,

A man who has a track record of showing love to God's people,

And who has a real faith in Christ Jesus,

I'm confident that you'll do even more than I ask.

This suggests that St Paul hopes that Philemon will free Onesimus.

There is one wonderfully cheeky P.S.

That we didn't hear from the lectern: **One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.**

He's saying: Philemon, get ready to receive me as your guest,

Because your prayers will effect my release,

And I'll come to see how you and Onesimus are reconciled

Through faith in Christ to love each other.

The life of faith and love is not theoretical but practical,

And in the letter to Philemon we have modelled for us

The boldness that faith in Christ works,

A boldness in speaking up for those who are fearful,

Because they have done the wrong thing;

A boldness in being ready to pay the cost, to repair damages;

And a boldness in seeking reconciliation,

That leads to joy deeper than the world can give.

St Paul modelled for us what Christ has done for us,

So let's exercise the faith as God gives us the opportunity,

And grow in Christian maturity and wisdom

As we together receive God's word. In Jesus' name. Amen.