

Forward thinking from Philemon

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Grace, Peace, Love, and Faith

Paul's epistle to his disciple and friend in Christ, Philemon, is short but contains the Holy Spirit's revolutionary teaching on one of the most important issues in Christianity for all time — slavery! The central individual in this short book included in the writings of the New Testament is one Onesimus, a slave run away from his Christian master, a leader in the church at Colossae. Sometimes commentators think that the apostle Paul had never been to Colossae, basing their conclusion on Paul's statement in that epistle that the Colossian brethren had heard the gospel from Epaphras, and that Paul had heard of their faith rather than personally witnessing it. The fact that the initial work was done by Epaphras does not exclude Paul from having been there, and his hearing of their faith would come from his continued monitoring of their progress through his information network. In fact, the internal things in the book of Philemon clearly indicate that Paul had been to Colossae; Philemon owed Paul his soul, Paul knew Philemon's family, and Onesimus, when he ran away, ran to Paul in prison in Rome. What follows is interesting and of signal importance for the churches for all time!

- **Opening greetings** - The apostle has a fairly standard but important greeting in his letters, whether the letter is to a congregation or to an individual. "Paul," says he, "a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and 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" (Philemon 1:1-3). This letter is one of the "prison epistles," written by Paul in prison in Rome, and carried by Tychicus and Onesimus. As is Paul's custom, he includes greetings from one of the men who were working with him at the time, this time Timothy. Apphia seems to be Philemon's beloved wife, and Archippus their son, who apparently was a teacher, preacher, and fellow worker in the Lord. Philemon, as a slave holder, had a large household, consisting of his family, servants, and slaves; this could constitute "the church in your house." As usual, the apostle prays that God's abundant grace might continue with those he specifically mentioned, as well as praying that they might have the true peace that can only come from God.
- **Paul's prayers** - Paul was concerned about all the churches, as he had clearly stated in his first recorded epistle to the Corinthians, and also deeply cared for each individual. "I thank my God always," he asserts, "making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love, and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints" (Philemon 1:4,5). The apostle brings forth his gratitude for such a man as Philemon, noting that his love for Jesus and for the saints is well known. Paul also mentions that this man's faith as he looked to Jesus was recognized by many, and that his belief in the potential of his fellow saints was also spoken of. This is a good man, possibly an elder, and the apostle recognizes these qualities in the sight of God. The apostle further prays, "that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake" (Philemon 1:7). Paul earnestly desires that this man be able to share his faith with others in a very effective way. Philemon was knowledgeable of the excellencies which come from participating in Christ, and petitioned that such knowledge be distributed around for the ultimate benefit of Christ and His kingdom.

Paul rightly praises the man to whom this letter is addressed. But there are no idle words emanating from the apostle. After listing these fine qualities, the apostle is going to appeal to Philemon for Onesimus, making his entreaty based on his assurance that Philemon will continue to exhibit those qualities as he makes his decision concerning the run away slave.

Forward thinking from Philemon

Fellowship of Your Faith

Christianity is designed to move from the concept to the appropriate action. For example, God so loved the world [concept] that He gave His only begotten Son [action]. Paul thus was very complimentary toward Philemon, noting that “I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints.” There must have been action on Philemon’s part, or there would have been nothing for Paul to hear about. His direct action, both love and faith, was directed toward the saints in Colossae, and thus an exhibition of his love and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

- **Effective** - An underlying principle of the faith of Christ is that saints are saved to serve. Philemon was this type of saint, and Paul was willing to petition the Almighty on behalf of his friend and brother in Christ: “I pray that the fellowship [sharing] of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake” (Philemon 1:6). The Christian life is fraught with many challenges; often saints are persecuted for their faith or ostracized by their families, there are financial and health issues, there are concerns for children or other family members, there are challenges within the local congregation... Hence it is very encouraging to the brethren if there is within the church a solid citizen of heaven, a stalwart of the faith whose rocklike steadfastness really strengthens the other Christians. Thus Paul was desirous that Philemon’s faith could be shared in by the other brethren, and that they would thus be encouraged. This becoming “effective” in the fellowship of the faith would not be possible were it not predicated on “knowledge.” The apostle’s prayer is on point and illustrates the relationship of this “knowledge of every good thing which is in you” and the development of the faith of saints like Philemon. The goal, understandably, is that Philemon’s faith ultimately be “toward Christ,” or as translated, “for Christ’s sake.”
- **Refreshment** - The apostle Paul was on the cutting edge of the spiritual revolution that Christ was bringing into the world. He was challenged in reaching his kinsmen according to the flesh — the Jews — and straining forward in reaching the Gentile world. Every little bit of positive news, then, would have been of major encouragement to the apostle. “For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love,” he remarks, “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother” (Philemon 1:7). Paul, a bond-servant of Christ, willingly laid down his life for the individual brethren and for the churches. It is therefore understandable that he would have “much joy and comfort” in the honest love which Philemon was exhibiting toward the saints in Colossae; his and Christ’s efforts were thus being multiplied. Furthermore, the hearts of the brethren were being “refreshed” — the saints were being greatly encouraged through this great man of faith.

All motivation at some point must come from within the individual. The great motivators of this earth have always had the ability to empower and encourage their teams, their troops, or their associates. How much greater, then, would it be to be involved in motivating the spiritually resurrected army of God, the mighty marching tide that is the only grouping that can carry the gospel to the ends of the earth! It is worthy of note, therefore, that Paul would say of Philemon that “the hearts of the saints” had been refreshed through him, and that the apostle would at that point significantly add the appellation, “brother.”

These statements by the apostle are not flattery; they are honest and straightforward expositions of the character of this Philemon. Paul has a purpose, however, for bringing forth the characterizations of his fellow worker for the kingdom; he has an appeal that he wants to make, and he is hopeful that his positive comments will elicit a similarly positive response from this honorable brother in Christ.

Forward thinking from Philemon

Paul's Appeal

Interaction with other people is often complicated and challenging. They, regardless of how tough an exterior they present, must be considered as somewhat fragile, and therefore handled with care. The scriptures thus are replete with exhortations on how to have positive interactions with others. Love for the other person is paramount in all communication, as Paul noted in his epistle to the Ephesian brethren, exhorting them to be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Words such as *kind* and *patient* come to mind, as well as “look out for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). Hence the apostle Paul, as he has a somewhat sensitive point he wants to discuss with his friend and fellow saint Philemon, will make his appeal very carefully, with every due consideration for the predicament and position of this leader in the church in Colossae.

- **No order** - The apostle Paul was a hard charging individual who week after week would enter a synagogue of the Jews to preach, knowing that generally there would be increasing and tremendous hostility toward him as his message developed. The apostle, then, would have no problem approaching his friend and brother in Christ, but note his careful approach in bringing up a delicate subject with Philemon: “Therefore,” he begins, drawing upon his earlier true comments upon his relationship with this man, and the listing of the fellow saint’s stellar character, “though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to that which is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you ...” (Philemon 1:8,9). He could have ordered Philemon to do what he wanted, but such ordering people around really does not work well. Even the Lord, as He works with mankind, appeals to them rather than ordering them; each person has a choice to respond to the love of God, or to refuse and face the consequences. Paul appeals.
- **The proper thing to do** - What is it that the apostle has in mind? He says he could order Philemon to do “that which is proper,” but has been very careful in introducing what that is. The problem — if that is what it could be called — is that Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves, has run away and come to where Paul was, in prison in Rome. While there, Onesimus has become a Christian; Paul is now sending him back to his master, and Paul wants Philemon to forgive and forget the past and welcome Onesimus back. So the apostle chooses his words carefully, and the Holy Spirit has seen fit to have those words recorded for the benefit of all saints in the future. “For love’s sake I rather appeal to you,” states the apostle, “since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1:9). Three bases for his appeal (and this is definitely getting personal!): 1) He’s Paul, Philemon’s friend; 2) He’s now “the aged”; 3) He’s a prisoner.
- **For Onesimus** - Now, after properly setting the stage, Paul gets to the delicate point, “I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me” (Philemon 1:10,11). A run away slave might have been executed, or at least punished severely. Paul called Onesimus his child, having converted the slave when Onesimus tracked him down and found him in one of Rome’s prisons.

The apostle Paul is the one who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, stated, “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In effect, Onesimus was a new person as a Christian; it was someone else — now dead — who ran away. So the apostle is appealing to his Christian friend to consider Onesimus in that regard, Onesimus having proven that he really was a changed man. There are certainly some lessons for modern Christians in that point alone!

Forward thinking from Philemon Begotten in my Imprisonment

The great challenge in Christianity is where the “theory” meets the “reality” of daily living. In the case of Philemon, the custom of the culture was pitted against the principles passed on by Christ. Onesimus, the run away slave, should have been executed or severely punished, but Philemon is now facing an appeal by the apostle Paul for clemency for the slave based on foundations of the faith of Christ. The appeal is both personal and principled. Paul pleads on the basis of his personal friendship with Philemon, and the fact that Paul is now an aged prisoner. But he also petitions on the basis of scripture; he describes Onesimus as his child “whom I have begotten,” bringing all the precepts of the concept of what is embodied in *the new creation* to the fore.

- **Begotten** - The word *begotten* is the past participle of the older English verb *beget*, of which the past tense is *begat*, as in “Abraham *begat* Isaac.” *Beget* directly deals with a man fathering a child; the somewhat broader meaning has to do with a physical birth. Because of this physical meaning, many have assumed that the appellation of Jesus as “the only begotten Son” is a reference to his physical birth from Mary. But the apostle Paul, preaching to a predominately Jewish audience in Antioch of Pisidia, defined the word *begotten* as a description of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, a spiritual birth rather than a physical birth (Acts 13:32-35). Hence the Christ is described as “the first-born from the dead” (Colossians 1:18). The apostle Paul takes that meaning and then applies it to the spiritual birth of someone coming forth from the waters of immersion in the likeness of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus Onesimus was *begotten* at his immersion at the hands of Paul in Rome.
- **“Greater works”** - One of Jesus’ amazing statements comes from His talks with the apostles during the night in which He was betrayed. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” the Christ had commented, “he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father” (John 14:12). The explanation that the future disciples of Christ would be able to do greater works than Jesus is this: Jesus walked on the water, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead; the disciple of Christ walks sinners to the water, “heals the sick,” “gives sight to the blind,” and “raises the dead,” all of which occur in immersion into Christ. There was not one single individual *born again* during the years of Jesus’ earthly sojourn; hence those who would believe in Christ would be able to do greater works than Christ because He went to the Father before any of that could happen. The apostle Paul was able in this sense to *beget* Onesimus; he was directly involved in the process of Onesimus’ new birth as the one who taught and presumably immersed him.
- **Child of faith** - Onesimus, Timothy, and many others were Paul’s children of faith. This was not a distant, philosophical relationship. As Paul wrote to his spiritual children in Thessalonica, he reminded them, “We were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Properly understood, the spiritual bond between a person and his spiritual children is stronger and more permanent than the bond between a parent and his physical children.

So when Paul states, “I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,” it is to be hoped that Philemon would recognize the power and personal interest in that appeal. And may saints today recognize the power connected with *begotten*, be actively involved in helping others experience the true new birth, and be mindful and appreciative of the spiritual connection between those who are taught the gospel and those who teach it.

Forward thinking from Philemon

A Changed Man

Does the message of the gospel really work? Is there any reference in the inspired record that would give credence to the idea that when people turn from darkness to light, there is actual change? There is an account of such a man in the sacred scriptures, a man who in human terms was a lowly slave, and a runaway at that. As testimony of the reality of that change, the apostle Paul was willing to put himself on the line, and the Holy Spirit furthermore was willing to have it recorded for all eternity. That man was Onesimus, of whom Paul wrote in addressing the Christian slave master Philemon, "I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus."

- **Formerly useless** - The apostle Paul, in this letter, does not directly say that Onesimus damaged things when he ran away, but he hints at it. What he does say is that Onesimus "formerly was useless to you" (Philemon 1:11). The whole institution of slavery is demotivating; there is no reward for a slave whether he works hard or whether he figures out how to get out of as much work as possible. It is easy to visualize Onesimus as an angry young man, locked in to a box of frustration, and just plain worthless as a worker. But he has some inner drive, and is willing to take the risks connected with being a runaway. He also makes a good choice as long as he is a runaway; he tracks down the apostle Paul! It is clear that Paul really cares for the soul of each individual, and is willing to work with this man, teaching him the gospel and helping him get his life and attitude straightened out. "Now," says Paul, "he is useful both to you and to me." Slaves were often given names that were numbers, such as *Tertius* (#3 – from Romans 16:22), or descriptions. *Onesimus* means "useful," so Paul is making a play on words to drive his point home.
- **Changed man** - Paul does not limit himself to simply describing Onesimus as now useful. "And I have sent him back to you in person," he comments, "that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel" (Philemon 1:12,13). The expression, "sending my very heart," is a very touching and powerful statement about how Paul's love had developed for this slave, and would also indicate how different a person Onesimus is following his conversion. But Paul also is emphatic in noting how useful Onesimus is, stating that "he is useful to me," and that the apostle wished to keep him "that he might minister to me in my imprisonment." If Onesimus were still useless and worthless, Paul in honesty could not have made those statements. This is definitely a new creation in Christ who has made a total turnaround.
- **Teamwork** - It is difficult to imagine what conditions were for Paul in prison in Rome. He is certainly sincere when he says that he would like to keep Onesimus there so that Onesimus could provide whatever ministrations Paul would need while incarcerated. "But without your consent I did not want to do anything," asseverates the apostle, showing his respect for Philemon and his desire to engage in teamwork for the cause of Christ, "that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will" (Philemon 1:14). Paul did not want to force a decision about Onesimus; he wants Philemon to make his own decision (implying that the decision will be under the heading of "goodness" as God defines it).

Onesimus, a run away slave, was such a changed man — as a result of his desire to be obedient to Christ, as a result of his hearing the word of God, and as a result of the Holy Spirit at work in him — that Paul wanted to keep him. But he was also so much of a new creation in Christ that Paul could trust him to do what he really needed to do as a Christian, to return to his slave master. That is a changed man!

Forward thinking from Philemon

More Than a Slave

The human race as a whole always seems to have some sort of a “caste system.” Because the inhabitants of earth as a whole really lack confidence and a sense of self worth, they tend to fill that void by putting others down as a twisted means of attempting to elevate themselves. Sometimes this false elevation is through the use of destructive verbiage, but when people have political or economic power, they generally use that power to drive others into a position of subjection or slavery. “What do you mean by crushing My people,” was the illustrative query of the Almighty to the nobility of Israel, “and grinding the face of the poor?” (Isaiah 3:15). The Lord, by contrast, has always put equal value on each person, whether it be Pharaoh or the slave girl who has to sleep behind the millstones, recognizing the intrinsic value of each eternal soul.

- **A beloved brother** - Paul is sending Onesimus, the now converted runaway, back to his Christian slave master, Philemon. He wants Philemon also to recognize the intrinsic value of each person, and he wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back. “For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while,” is Paul’s comment, “that you should have him back forever, 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” (Philemon 1:15,16). Through Christ, God destroyed the spiritual barrier between Gentile and Jew, and elevated the status of women to that of equal heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7). *But He also destroyed the caste system of the difference between slave and free, which is the major blockbuster contribution of the book of Philemon.* “You have him back,” is Paul’s emphasis, “as a beloved brother!” In Christ Jesus, said Paul, “we recognize no man according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16). Inside the church of the living God, it does not matter whether one is rich or poor, slave or free, male or female; all have equal standing (not necessarily equal roles) before the Lord. Hence it is that a slave might be the teacher, and the slave master the student in a class connected with the assembly of the saints.
- **Personal relationships** - The apostle emphasizes that Philemon has Onesimus back “no longer as a slave.” Onesimus is still going to live in slave quarters, and Philemon in the big house. Onesimus is still going to do as he is told, work according to his ability, and receive according to his need, as the man in the big house decides what his need is. In the material realm, Onesimus is still a slave. But the picture is that Onesimus is a brother in Christ to Philemon, and Philemon from this point on is to greet Onesimus accordingly. The overall panorama is that Philemon has the role of the master on the team of brothers, and Onesimus has the role of worker on the team of brothers. Paul no doubt bossed Onesimus around when Onesimus was in Rome, but obviously still loved him as a brother and treated him as a brother; his words are that Onesimus was a brother “especially to me.” But the apostle adds, “how much more” to Philemon, since Onesimus is going to be physically present in Colossae. What a picture!

Part of Paul’s communication to Philemon was that Philemon would have Onesimus back “forever.” *Forever* puts everything else into focus; the slave/free relationship is only for an earthly life’s duration, and is therefore comparatively insignificant. Saints, of course, are to have an eternal perspective. Since Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ’s family, with Jesus being the older brother, it is imperative that those saints be in the process of building those relationships which last for eternity. Philemon was going have Onesimus back, “no longer as slave, but more than a slave, a *beloved* brother.” The lesson is clear!!

Forward thinking from Philemon

Perhaps

There are many events and circumstances in the lives of people and Christians. While these events often seem random or even destructive, one of the overall portrayals that the scripture gives is that God is aware of, and — while allowing the free will of mankind to be executed — orchestrating the history of man so that His will is accomplished. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, He declared, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9). While this statement of the All Wise is true as a general statement, it is specifically directed at the idea that God orchestrates the affairs of men in such a way that His word which goes forth from His mouth will not return to Him empty, and without accomplishing the purpose for which He sent it. “Seek from the book of the Lord, and read,” enjoins the Most High, referring to those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life from the foundation of the world, “Not one of these will be missing; none will lack its mate. For His mouth has commanded, and His Spirit has gathered them” (Isaiah 34:16). There is a God who governs the affairs of men, and is working in the details as well as managing the big picture.

- **The circumstances** - Onesimus ran away from his Christian slave master Philemon in Colossae. From Colossae he would have had to find his way to the sea and passage thence to Rome, or he would have had to go by land from what is now western Turkey across the Bosphorus to the Balkans, then across the Balkan peninsula to Italy and thence to Rome. At Rome he would have had to search to find the prison wherein Paul was incarcerated, then arrange to meet the apostle. In either case, it was a long and complicated journey for a runaway slave, with many opportunities for “bad things” to happen on the way. But Onesimus made it, and was “begotten” by Paul while the apostle was still imprisoned. Paul then sent Onesimus back to Colossae as part of the team with other Christian men, and the slave obviously survived that journey as well.
- **The parting** - A slave’s running away is clearly not a parting of company by mutual agreement. Philemon’s character as indicated in the underlying tones of this epistle is that he is a dedicated Christian, and governs himself accordingly. While there may have been some frustration at the incident, and maybe some damaged property, Philemon would also have been concerned for the welfare of his slave. So Onesimus’ disappearance would have caused quite a bit of consternation on the part of this good Christian man.
- **The “perhaps”** - The apostle, then, in comforting, encouraging, and appealing to Philemon, comments, “For *perhaps* he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever” (Philemon 1:15). His point clearly is that all these circumstances might have been the necessary ones for Onesimus’ conversion. But it is also clear that the apostle could not say definitely that they were.

Even the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, could not definitely say what the connection between the circumstances connected with an unruly slave’s rebellious departure, and the eventual conversion of the slave; the strongest word he could use was *perhaps*. If that is the strongest word the apostle could use, no one in future circumstances could use one stronger. For modern day saints, the lesson is that God is orchestrating, using people of all kinds in their strengths and weaknesses, in their obedience or rebellion, to accomplish His plan. Every Christian, then, needs to give thanks to God for all things, knowing that all things work together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.

Forward thinking from Philemon Regarded as a Partner

For an appeal to be effective and honest, the proper groundwork has to be laid. A simple, non-costly appeal does not require much groundwork because of its simplicity; asking a co-worker to reach and hand over a tool does not require much of a working relationship, and does not require much preparation before the request is made. But if the request is complicated, costly, time-consuming, or requiring the other person to step out of a comfort zone, then the proper points have to be put into place and enumerated before the appeal can legitimately be made. Paul, in preparation for making his plea to Philemon, had laid down the following points: 1) Philemon was a beloved brother and fellow worker. 2) Paul complimented Philemon on his reputation for loving the Lord Jesus, and for all the saints. 3) Paul personally was comforted by Philemon's love, because the hearts of the saints had been refreshed by Philemon. 4) Paul had dealt honorably with Onesimus, the runaway slave. 5) Paul had "begotten" Onesimus while Paul was imprisoned, and had trained the slave in the ways of Christ. 6) Paul's work had been effective, for Onesimus was truly a changed man and obedient Christian. 7) When Onesimus was sufficiently on the right spiritual track, Paul sent him back to Philemon.

Paul then pointed out that Onesimus was not merely a returned slave, but a beloved brother in Christ to Philemon, and that the two would be in fellowship forever.

- **The appeal** - With these points in place and properly emphasized, the apostle is ready for his appeal: "If then you regard me as a partner," is the apostle's tendered offer, "accept him as you would me" (Philemon 1:17). That is quite an appeal! Philemon clearly respected Paul, and would have done much for him. Essentially Paul is asking that Philemon welcome Onesimus back much like the prodigal son.
- **Clearing away objections** - Part of any persuasion is clearing away objections the other party may have. The apostle anticipates that Onesimus' leaving Philemon might not have been pleasant, and that the slave in the process of running away may have inflicted damage of different kinds. So Paul says, "But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (Philemon 1:18). As Christ was willing to give us new beginning, so Paul is doing his part to give this brother a new beginning in going back to his life as a slave; any charges or damages were to be written on Paul's ledger. These are not mere words; the apostle says to his beloved brother in Christ, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it!" (Philemon 1:19).
- **A little reminder** - One of the great principles of the scripture is that the sowing of spiritual seed is of much greater value than the seed of the ground. "If we sowed spiritual things in you," he queried the church in Corinth, "is it too much if we should reap material things from you?" (1 Corinthians 9:11). To make his next stage of appeal to Philemon, the apostle uses this principle in regard to possibility of Philemon's asking Paul to cover the expenses connected with the runaway Onesimus: "I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)." Philemon, if he processed correctly, would know the debt he owed to Paul for the salvation of his soul was so great that the drachmas-worth of damage caused by Onesimus was so small as not to be worthy of consideration.

As Paul closed off his importuning, he appealed, knowing the character of Philemon. "Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord," is his plea, regarding basically the cancellation of any physical debt connected with Onesimus, "refresh my heart in Christ" (Philemon 1:20). With everyone forgiven both physical and spiritual debt, there is a great lifting of burdens, a great refreshing!

Forward thinking from Philemon

Thanks and Closing Remarks

In order to work properly and positively with people, including Christians, there are certain important factors in beginning conversations, and certain factors in ending conversations that are critical. To be effective in leading personal Bible studies, for example, the Bible teacher has to be able to segue [pronounced *seg-way*] into the Bible study from the important initial personal conversations. Similarly, telephone conversations need to be opened carefully, and those who have good people skills know how to do this. And when the dialogue is over, it is important to finish the call adroitly. This is true of all interaction with people, whether in face-to-face communication, or whether by letter. The apostle Paul used all these skills in his letter to Philemon.

- **Beginning the close** - Paul opens this letter very positively, honestly addressing Philemon with respect and in love. He then makes his segue into his appeal for Onesimus. Having made his appeal — having gotten his business conducted — then he segues into his exit from the epistle. “Having confidence in your obedience,” he avers, “I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say” (Philemon 1:21). This is a great transition; it is positive, it ties up any loose ends in the letter, and sets the stage for closing comments.
- **Personal connection** - All effective motivation makes a personal connection. On a broad scale, the Law of Moses was not motivational — it was impersonal. The gospel, on the other hand, is very personal, bringing the individual face to face with the loving, forgiving —yet commanding respect — Christ! The apostle takes the next step in his close with this personal connection to Philemon: “At the same time,” he proceeds, “also prepare for me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you” (Philemon 1:22). He is building the bridge in this relationship, so that his appeal will be honored. Most likely Paul was never going to get back to Colossae, but this is how he closes out this section with his fellowship with Philemon intact.
- **Fellow greeters** - The first century congregations, though independent and separated by distance and travel difficulties, still had many ties to each other. “Epaphras,” Paul begins his list, “my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you” (Philemon 1:23). Epaphras was from Colossae, and featured in the letter to the brethren in that city. He continues, “as do Mark [the author of the gospel of Mark, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Aristarchus [Paul’s traveling companion from Macedonia, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Demas [who later was pulled back into this present world, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Luke [Paul’s faithful companion, who also eventually accompanied him to Rome, mentioned also in the book of Colossians], my fellow workers” (Philemon 1:24). These men were working with Paul in Rome, yet were known to the brethren in Colossae. There was obviously a lot of movement between congregations for these types of relationships to exist.
- **Closing** - Paul’s close is typical for him, “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with your spirit” (Philemon 1:25). These are sincere words, appealing for the grace of Christ to be strengthening and encouraging the spirit of Philemon as he faced his personal challenges in dealing with a returning runaway and continuing his leadership in the congregation in Colossae.

In this small book of Philemon, the personal nature of Christianity stands out. Here the intimate connection between Paul and Philemon is manifest, as well as the connection between Paul and Onesimus. Here the barrier between slave and free is clearly torn down, and the slave owner now has a “beloved brother” in the man who is in earthly bondage. Here the personal interactions between various workers in various congregations show, as well as the teamwork between autonomous but sister congregations. Praise God who through His Holy Spirit orchestrated the circumstances between Onesimus, Paul, and Philemon, and who saw fit to have this epistle included in the eternal record!