

## Refresh My Heart

### Philemon 1-21

What do you do when someone wrongs you? How do you treat the one who did you wrong? Paul gives us some guides on how to refresh each other's heart in the Lord, when just a situation arises.

Paul, who had earlier visited the Asia Minor city of Colossae and helped to form the house church there (v. 2), was under a kind of house arrest in Rome (or possibly Ephesus). A young man named Onesimus had run away from Colossae and had come to be helpful (his name means "useful" or "beneficial") to Paul in his imprisonment. Paul had strengthened Onesimus's fledgling Christian faith, and a close bond—like that of a father to a son—had grown between them. While recognizing that Onesimus was still indebted to Philemon or in some way estranged from him, Paul gave thanks for Philemon's Christian love and faith and appealed to him—not on the basis of duty but of love—to take Onesimus back. He asked that he do so, not only without any punishment to him, but as a "beloved brother ... in the Lord" (v. 16), as "the faithful beloved brother, who is one of you" (Col. 4:9).

Tychicus, another "beloved brother" (Col. 4:7-9), carried the letter to Philemon, and perhaps another to the church at Colossae, and brought Onesimus along with him. With him, too, come other news and encouragement from Paul and several of his companions to the new Christian friends in Colossae. Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, Archippus, and Epaphras were other brethren, disciples, and fellow laborers for Christ, who would have been mentioned or traveled with them.

You may think Paul was being manipulative with his flattery regarding Philemon's faith and love. Paul also added his hope to come for a visit and asked him to "prepare a guest room for *him*," v. 22). The driving force behind the letter was Paul's desire for reconciling love in a new community of sibling like relationships. "In the Lord" or "in Christ" there was no longer

special status—up or down, older or younger, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28)—for all are beloved brothers and sisters in the love of God in the Lord Christ Jesus.

The letter may have made the readers think of a story of Jesus of a father's attempt to reconcile back into a family the wastrel, prodigal son and his self-righteous brother. "All these years I have been working like a slave for you," complained the elder brother to his father. We do not know how that story (Luke 15:11-32). Does the elder sibling finally come in and join the party, reconciled to his brother again? Does he stay outside pouting, insisting on his legal and moral rights? At the conclusion of that story, the question is put to the hearer of the narrative. What would we do in similar circumstances?

Imagine an illegal immigrant today. Say that it is José trying to earn money for his family back in Guatemala, or Rosa, now the single mother of children born in this country, but who herself entered the country illegally. There are reasons for laws dealing with illegal immigrants, and Christians are meant to be law-abiding citizens, yet, before all else, the immigrant is a sister or brother in the love of God. Gospel teaching and baptismal vows call Christians to respect the dignity of every human being. Imagine receiving a letter—one Christian community to another—commending reconciliation and care for Rosa.

So the story does go on, giving added significance to Paul's concluding words and prayer in his letter to Philemon: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." **Frederick Borsch**

The letter to Philemon is a model of pastoral care: loving, thoughtful, diplomatic, and carefully theological. The situation is delicate, and Paul the pastor stands between two parishioners who are at serious odds, asking them not only to be reconciled to each other but also to model the new life in Christ to which the entire church is called.

Philemon is a wealthy man. He owns a slave (v. 16) and is master of a house large enough to accommodate a church (v. 2). He, his wife Apphia, and Archippus are the leaders of this congregation (vv. 1-2), and the entire community is invited to listen in as the apostle makes his request (v. 2). What has Onesimus done to Philemon? Did he simply run away? Verse 18 mentions both "injustice" (NRSV "wronged") and "debt" (NRSV "owes ... anything"); did

Onesimus steal something from his master? Paul says only that Onesimus has found his way to Paul, who is in prison (v. 1), and has become a Christian through Paul's ministry (v. 10), even as Philemon himself once did (v. 19).

The letter begins, as all Paul's letters do, with a greeting from God (v. 3) that reminds Paul's listeners that he speaks not on his own authority but as an agent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then Paul speaks directly to his reason for writing. Philemon's love and faith are well known among Christians (vv. 4-5), and the apostle prays that the partnership of Philemon's faith (v. 6; NRSV "sharing") might become still more well known among believers. Paul asks no small favor from Philemon in order to make effective that "knowledge of the good" (v. 6). He calls him to manumit a slave and forgive a debt, two things that could cause a wealthy man in antiquity to lose face.

Paul says he makes an appeal rather than a command (vv. 8-9) because of his love for Philemon. His repeated references to his own imprisonment (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23) serve to remind Philemon of the cost of Christian discipleship; he asks no more of Philemon than Christ asks of all believers. Paul reminds Philemon they are coworkers (v. 1) and partners (vv. 6, 17) in the gospel; Philemon is both Paul's brother (vv. 7, 20) and his son (v. 10). Philemon has hosted not only the church but the apostle as well (v. 7) and will soon have the opportunity again to show hospitality (v. 22). The apostle writes not only as a brother, but as the old person in the family (v. 9), a reminder that he was in Christ before Philemon was and thus has the superior family status and the right to ask what he does.

Peace between Philemon and Onesimus requires that the Philemon receive the Onesimus "no longer as a slave but ... a beloved brother" now that both are Christians (v. 16). This is "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16), and Onesimus therefore now merits the same welcome in Philemon's home that Paul enjoys. It was considered extremely shameful in their society to enslave one's brother; so to call Onesimus a brother "in the flesh" forbids Philemon to hold him in bondage. Paul calls Philemon to renounce his privilege and be willing to suffer loss, both socially and economically. This is at the heart of Paul's ethical teaching: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in

you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:4-5). To give up his rights to collect a debt and punish a slave, Philemon must imitate Christ's own willingness to give up his "equality with God" (Phil. 2:6).

How might we contemporary Christians listen to the apostle along with the church that meets in Philemon's house? The distinction we make between charity and justice—on the one hand, meeting people's needs and, on the other hand, changing structures that make and keep people in need. The revelation of Christ crucified and raised, means that Paul is convinced that God is indeed overturning social structures, although that revolution takes place in the church rather than in the world.

More immediately, there are untold instances of conflict between church members—or between different communities of Christians—that mirror Philemon's conflict with Onesimus. People wrong one another and owe one another. Paul speaks of both men as Christian brothers and calls the stronger to release the weaker. Also, Paul prevails on Philemon to honor the bonds that Christ has formed between him and Onesimus. The language of brotherhood and sisterhood to describe the church results from Paul's use of adoption to describe baptism, which makes Philemon and Onesimus brothers (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; cf. Eph. 1:5). Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that we are not to use language of sisterhood and brotherhood lightly in our churches. The terms represent real and deep family ties; and as with every family, those ties always have profound and sometimes profoundly difficult consequences. **E. Elizabeth Johnson**

This letter offers three of Paul's challenges to us.

First, as mentioned, Paul challenges us to a novel twofold way of relating to people. He counsels us never to try to dominate another person. Even riskier, he counsels us to pay no attention to their attempts to dominate us.

Second, Paul's trust in God is so deep that he is able to discern the love of God in every circumstance, no matter how contrary—even in imprisonment, from which he writes as calmly as from a hotel penthouse. Imagine for a moment revisiting the catalog of *your* ills

and misfortunes and discovering a loving gift concealed within each. That may sound Pollyannaish to you, but it is the discovered wisdom of humanity's most courageous teachers.

Third, Paul challenges Philemon to allow the Holy Spirit to take up residence within him and start moving the furniture. He trusts his friend to quit worrying about respectability, in favor of what is just and right. That Spirit heightens our native abilities in ways that feel at once both natural and preternatural, always generously on behalf of others. **Gray Temple**

Brothers and sisters we are to forgive one another. We are to treat one another as we would like to be treated. We are to refresh one another's heart in the Lord.

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