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# The Appeal and Plea for Onesimus

## Philemon 8-17

### Introduction

This is an outline.  
It is not a full manuscript.

What unfolds now is the story. It lies behind what we see here.

Onesimus is the bondservant, the slave of a Christian man, Philemon.

Philemon lives in Colossae and the church there meets in his home. He has been instrumental in working with Paul as a partner in ministry as has his whole family.

Onesimus ran away from Colossae to Rome, stealing a sum of money. He was captured by the Roman authorities and put in prison.

In prison, Onesimus met Paul who witnessed to him. God granted him saving faith and he became a Christian.

Now, the Roman government is going to send Onesimus back to Philemon. It seems, at this time, that Epaphras, from the church there, is also visiting Paul in prison. So, Onesimus and Tychicus are preparing to return to Colossae, each bearing a letter from Paul.

This letter, which we are looking at now, was written by Paul to Philemon to appeal for forgiveness of Onesimus.

### **Its Relationships (v.8-10)**

The appeal comes through a deep relationship.

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup>yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

#### **With an Authority not Exercised (v.8)**

Paul had the spiritual authority to command Philemon. Instead, he chose to appeal to him...

Paul has the confidence, the boldness to use his authority. Instead, he chose in humility to appeal in love..

#### **By an Approach from Love (v.9)**

Paul would rather appeal because of love...

Modeling God's way who often commands and often appeals through love...

In relational matters, it is often better to exercise love, than authority...

But the appeal also has an emotional element of persuasion:

The appeal is for love's sake...

The appeal is from an old man...

The appeal is from a prisoner for Christ...

Frankly, how is Philemon going to say no that?

### **For an Appeal for Onesimus (v.10)**

This is a poignant and powerful appeal. You can feel the sweet, but unmistakable pressure being applied. If the original word order were followed, our translation would read, "I appeal to for my child, whom I have begotten in my chains, Onesimus." His name is at the end of the sentence. Paul could have pointed out what a useless, runaway thief he was. But the appeal would be on the wrong note, in the wrong key. The first mention of Onesimus' name is not as a slave, but as a son.

Jesus stands to appeal for us, not as slaves, but as sons. His wounded hands are silent appeals to a loving Father poised to receive, not slaves, but children.

### **Its Character (v.11-14)**

Listen to the character, the quality, the poise of this appeal.

<sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup> I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

### **From a Transformed Life (v. 11)**

A play here on Onesimus' name. This man was useless (A-Onesimus) and now has become useful (Onesimus) once again. He is truly now what his name means. He has become his identity.

Onesimus has also lived up to his name by being useful to Paul. We do not know exactly what that usefulness was but he surely had come to serve Paul well.

Paul shows us how important to put others first. He would have liked to keep Onnesimus near, but he wants even more to send him to Philemon. Then any act of generosity to Paul would simply be free, uncoerced, voluntary.

### **With a Deep Affection (v.12)**

Paul says that he is sending him back. But he is not merely sending a man, a slave, or even a brother. Onesimus has become dear to Paul. So, Philemon, be careful for in him I am sending you my heart.

### **By a Respectful Preference (v.13-14)**

Paul would have loved to have kept this useful servant with him. He would be such a help for this church leader, this Apostle, who was, after all, in prison for the sake of the gospel.

But instead, Paul chose to send Onesimus back to Philemon. That way, if Philemon chose to let Onesimus serve Paul in Rome, it would be out of goodness of heart. There would be no feeling of being obligated. It would entirely be the choice of Philemon.

## **Its Expression (v.15-17)**

Now Paul expresses what he is appealing for.

<sup>15</sup>For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

### **By a Sovereign Purpose (v.15)**

In Paul's theology all "perhaps" are "sovereign certainties."

Notice too that Philemon is part of a gospel church. Surely there would have been opportunities for Onesimus to hear the gospel and be saved there. Yet, God stirs his sinful heart to run, get captured and then end up in a city, far away, in the same prison as the Apostle Paul. Does this imply some deficiency on the part of the church at Colossae? No, I think not. This is the sheer, stunning, wisdom of God.

This is what we all must learn in our Christian life. We often will suffer short term losses in this life for the sake of eternal gains in the life to come. It is a hard lesson. When we do not learn it, we will easily become discontent and prone to complaining.

### **For a Superior Relationship (v.16)**

God's great sovereign and saving purpose means that Onesimus is now a reminder of the priority of our being related in Christ. All our relationships are three dimensional. We are related to one another, in this case as master and slave but now as brothers. We are related to God so that we are sons and daughters and thus, now, are more than what we used to be. We are related to the flesh and to the Lord, to the realm and now, to the new realm.

Working out the overlap of these relationships is what Philemon must do. What does it mean, what is now most important for his relationship to Onesimus? How will he see him now? Their new relationship should mean everything...

### **With a Simple Condition (v.17a)**

The appeal is expressed with a simple condition. It is assumed to be true. Paul is sure that Philemon considers them to be partners, to be in spiritual fellowship. They are connected, not only as friends, not only as believers, but also as serving together for Christ.

### **In a Loving Command (v.17b)**

Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back just as he would receive Paul.

Here is the essence of the gospel: we are received by the Father as He has received Jesus. As one writer put it:

The doctrine of the believer's identification with Christ is beautifully portrayed here. "Receive him, that is, mine own heart" was Paul's plea. Onesimus was so a part of Paul that it pained Paul even to send him back home! Verse 17 is what Jesus Christ says of every true believer, "Receive him as Myself!" We are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). Onesimus was not returning home the same old person. He had a completely new standing before his master: he was now a brother beloved, identified with Paul, and therefore accepted. This is what the Bible means by justification: we are in Christ and therefore accepted before God. (Warren W. Wiersbe)

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## Reflect and Respond

There is a question here: how is Paul's appeal not just manipulation? Now the Bible does not have the word "manipulation." In our use of the word, it is always bad. It is a kind of unacceptable, pressured, emotional persuasion toward a self-serving goal. Is this what is going on here? Yes, but with one big difference: it is pressured, emotional persuasion for a good end *on behalf of another*. To use emotional, pressured, persuasion for self-centered ends is wrong. But there are

This letter is meant to teach us several things:

What God has done for us in our salvation is a model for our relationships with others.

The relationships we have are with our Christian brothers and sisters are very important. Yet we casually discard them and don't do what we can to maintain them.

We must be poised to accept new believers, to forgive them where they may have sinned against us and to welcome them as Jesus has welcomed us.

There is a place for Christians to mediate and appeal for one another. This is the place for truth in love.

May the Lord help us to grow in our affection and appreciation for one another.