

Paul Makes a Pledge to Philemon

Philemon 1:18-21

Philemon 1:18-21: *“But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.”¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.”*

Background Notes

Onesimus was a runaway slave who, besides running away, had probably stolen money or valuables from his master as well. This is hinted in verse 18: *“But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.”* Onesimus had run to the big city of Rome, about 1,000 miles away from Colosse, where his master Philemon lived. That would be like running away from a small town in the Midwest to the big metropolis of New York City. Onesimus probably thought that he would never be traced in crowded Rome. But God arranged events so that Onesimus’ path crossed the path of the apostle Paul in Rome. Amazing! Was this a coincidence? No way. God arranged this.

Onesimus may have already known the apostle Paul, or at least known of him because Philemon and the apostle Paul were friends. In fact, Onesimus may have known that Paul was under house arrest in Rome, and actually looked him up. In any case, Onesimus became a Christian as a result of meeting Paul in Rome, and now Paul was sending him back to Philemon with this letter.

Because Onesimus had become a Christian, he had to do the right thing. He had to return to Philemon and straighten things out. This was not as easy as you might think. In the Roman Empire, runaway slaves could be put to death - especially if they had stolen property.

So this personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon was primarily meant to pave the way for Onesimus to return. Paul used “friendly persuasion” to convince Philemon that he should forgive Onesimus, and he even offered to pay for anything Onesimus owed! Notice that Paul purposely said “if” – he didn’t affirm that Onesimus had stolen (v18). And in verse 19 Paul reminded Philemon, *“you owe me even your own self.”* This is a good indication that Paul led Philemon to the Lord.

Notice also in verse 19 that Paul said he was writing the letter with his own hand. It seems that Paul usually dictated his letters to someone on his team, who then wrote his message down – perhaps because Paul had poor eyesight. However, because this was a very personal appeal to Philemon for Onesimus, Paul wrote at least part of this letter in his own hand.

In verse 20 when Paul said, *“let me have joy from you in the Lord”* or *“let me benefit from you in the Lord”* - once again he was using a play on words as he did in verse 11. The word “benefit” and the name “Onesimus” come from the same root word, meaning “useful” or “profitable.” So in essence Paul was saying, “Philemon, let me find in you a ‘true Onesimus!’”

In verse 21 Paul came very close to actually telling Philemon to release Onesimus, and give him his freedom: *“Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”* The only way Philemon could do “even more” was to give Onesimus his freedom - or at least to send him back to Rome, on loan to serve Paul and the missionary team.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should “go to bat” for one another in Christ.

“Going to bat” for people means defending them or standing up for them. Paul “went to bat” for Onesimus. In verse 17 Paul told Philemon to treat Onesimus the same way he would treat Paul himself. In verse 18 he told Philemon that he would even take full financial responsibility for every wrong that Onesimus had done: *“if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.”*

This is a great illustration of *“imputation.”* Do you know what *imputation* is, in reference to salvation? **Imputation is the act of God whereby our sins are put on Jesus Christ’s account, and His righteousness is put on our account.** In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we read *“For God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”* That’s imputation.

Our sins were put on Jesus Christ’s account when God judged Christ on the cross - just as if He were the sinner. Jesus Christ Himself was not a sinner - that’s for sure. 1 Peter 2:22 says, *“He committed no sin.”* 1 John 3:5 says, *“In Him there is no sin.”* And 2 Corinthians 5:21 clearly says *“He knew no sin.”* Jesus Christ was perfect. He was perfectly righteous, but our sins were put on His account, and the Lord Jesus was judged on the cross for our sins. He became the sinner, as it were. He was not the sinner, but He was judged as the sinner. Our sin was transferred to His account.

As a result, when we trusted Him for salvation, His righteousness was transferred to our account, and now we’re righteous in Him. We are righteous in Jesus Christ! We are not righteous in ourselves, but God sees us as righteous because

Jesus Christ's righteousness has been transferred to our account. That is imputation. Remember this definition: "Imputation is the act of God whereby our sins are put on Christ's account, and Christ's righteousness is put on our account."

There's a great illustration of imputation in verses 17-18. Paul told Philemon to put the Onesimus' wrongdoing on Paul's account, and as a result to receive Onesimus just as if he were the apostle Paul himself! Philemon was to put the apostle Paul's good and righteous living on Onesimus' account.

As Paul went to bat for Onesimus, so we should go to bat for fellow believers in Christ. Notice it is "*in Christ*." Onesimus was a changed person. As a Christian, he wanted to make things right. Paul wasn't covering up wrongdoing, but he was going to bat for Onesimus because Onesimus had acknowledged his wrongdoing. He had become a Christian, and now he wanted to do the right thing. We should be willing to do the same for fellow believers.

A few years ago one of my students messed up big time. He was about to be kicked out of school - and rightly so! But this student came to me in repentance. I could sense that he was truly sorry for what he had done. He genuinely wanted to get his act together and do the right thing. So I went to bat for him. I pleaded his case in the administrative committee, and he was allowed to stay in school. I'm happy to say that this young man is going on well in his Christian life, and faithfully serving the Lord.

We should all be willing to go to bat for fellow believers who truly want to change, and do the right thing. Sometimes it may even involve paying for damages, as Paul was willing to do for Onesimus. Believers should go to bat for one another in Christ.

2. Believers should refresh one another's hearts in Christ.

Verse 20: "*Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.*"

Here's a little lesson in translation. The word that's translated "*heart*" in this verse (as well as in verses 7 and 12) is actually the word for *intestines*! That's why the King James Version accurately translates the word as "bowels." So "bowels" or "intestines" is actually a more exact word-for-word translation than "heart." In that 1st century culture, the *intestines* were considered to be the seat of affections - and thus that's the word Paul used here. But today we think of the *heart* as the seat of affections, not the intestines, thus the Greek word for intestines is paraphrased as "heart" in these verses. The essential meaning is the same.

If Philemon followed the advice Paul gave him about Onesimus, Paul's heart would be refreshed, or encouraged. Philemon had refreshed other believers (v7); now Paul asked Philemon to refresh *his* heart by receiving Onesimus back as a brother in Christ.

It is still possible for us to refresh one another's hearts in Christ. Just yesterday a man stopped by my office to tell me that he was still benefiting from some taped lectures I gave at his church some years ago. That refreshed my heart! It greatly encouraged me! As many of you know, we now have a website, www.growingchristians.org. The good feedback that we are getting from brothers and sisters around the world about the teaching that's on the website really does encourage my heart in Christ!

When was the last time you "refreshed" the heart of a fellow believer? When was the last time your heart was refreshed by a fellow believer? Believers should refresh one another's hearts in Christ.

Practical Application

You can serve the Lord - even if you are a converted thief!

Onesimus was formerly a thief - but he had been saved and was now serving the Lord. Have you committed a crime in the past? Are you a former thief - or worse? Perhaps you are even listening to this recorded Talk from Philemon in a prison. If you repent and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, God can pick up the pieces in your life. God can change you completely - and use you for His glory!

Many years ago a friend of mine in the Chicago area committed murder when he was in a drunken state. While he was in prison for this crime, he became a Christian, and since his release he has been serving the Lord in prison ministry! What a change!

It's amazing what God can do through lives that have been completely changed by a relationship with Jesus Christ! You, too, can serve the Lord - even if you're a converted thief!