

Notes on

Paulus' Letter to Filemon

Authorship and Date

The letter was written by Paulus of Tarsus in about 57 CE, perhaps between his letters to the Galatians and Kolossaeans. The letter has been said to be closely related to Kolossaeans, and indeed nine of the same people are mentioned in each letter. Since Daemas and Lukas are both listed as Paulus' coworkers, a date after that of Kolossaeans is probably out of the question. Certainly by the time of 2 Timotheos (also in 57 CE), Daemas had left the cause.

Paulus himself was in chains here, as in Kolossaeans, so the timing must be quite similar. The letter was written from Ephesus while Paulus was being detained.

Commentary

Paulus, a prisoner of Anointed Jesus, and Timotheos the brother

To Filemon the beloved one and our coworker, and Apphia the sister, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and the assembly that is at your house.

Hello to you, and peace from Father God and our Lord, Anointed Jesus.

The greeting is somewhat traditional, with Paulus recalling specific people who were close to Filemon, including a group of Christians who met with him.

I always thank my God, making remembrance of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and trust (which you have toward Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones), so that the partnership of your trust would become working in recognition of every good thing for the Anointed One that is in us. For we have much joy and comfort about your love, because the deep feelings of the holy ones have been refreshed through you, O brother.

In anticipation of the disclosure portion of the letter, Paulus reminds Filemon about the basic principles of Love and Trust, praising Filemon for displaying both of these qualities. In particular, Paulus expresses confidence in the fact that Filemon openly shows love toward others, because he is about to ask him to display more of the same.

So, since I have much freedom of speech in the Anointed One to direct you about the appropriate things; rather I advise you on account of love, since I am such a person: as Paulus, an old man, but now also a prisoner of Anointed Jesus. I am advising you about my child, Onesimus, whom I fathered in bonds. He was once disadvantageous to you but now he is advantageous both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you; this one is my deep feelings.

Now Paulus appeals to the freedom of speech that is the character of good relationships. This allows him to say something that he knows will be difficult. Before getting to the details, he points out his own motivation: love.

Reminding Filemon about his prisoner status is no incidental comment, for immediately thereafter he discloses the purpose for his letter: a slave named Onesimus. Rather than use the term "slave" here, though, he refers to Onesimus as being "in bonds," rather similar to his own situation.

The name "Onesimus" means, roughly "profitable." Therefore, Paulus makes a word play on the meaning of that name. As a rebellious (?) and runaway slave, Onesimus was disadvantageous, but now that he is returning to Filemon willingly, he is advantageous. Paulus himself takes responsibility for having urged Onesimus to return to his master. At the same time, Paulus points out how much he cares about Onesimus, hoping again that this appeal will succeed.

I was wishing to hold him for myself, so that he might serve me on your behalf in the bonds of the good message. But I wanted to do nothing without your opinion, so that your good thing would not be as according to necessity but according to choice.

Sending Onesimus back gives Paulus somewhat of an advantage in the conversation, for it makes him able to point out that Onesimus could have simply stayed away. Paulus remarks that he would have liked to have kept Onesimus there with him, to help him there while he too was in bondage.

But Paulus submits to Filemon in the matter, recognizing his authority over the slave. He wants Filemon to set the slave free, but he can say nothing that would require it.

For perhaps he was withdrawn for an hour on this account, so that you might receive him for an age, no longer as a slave but above a slave -- a beloved brother -- especially to me. Now how much more rather to you, both physically and in the Lord!

At this point, Paulus appeals to Filemon's deep-rooted religious beliefs. By returning, Onesimus shows that he is now more than a slave. In fact, he and Filemon are both "brothers" now, in that they are Christians. Paulus adds an aside -- that Onesimus has proven himself to be brotherly toward Paulus as well, and Filemon clearly respects the author.

Notice that "an hour" is the (relatively short) time that Onesimus was gone from Filemon's service, yet he returns to stay a relatively long time (an age).

Therefore, if you have me as a partner, receive him as you would receive me. But if he has done some injustice to you, or is indebted, record this to me. I, Paulus, wrote this with my hand. I will pay it off, so that I am not telling you that you owe me even yourself. Yes brother, may I profit from you in the Lord. Refresh my deep feelings in the Anointed One.

Consequently, Paulus appeals to the strength of his relationship with Filemon. Rather than having Onesimus beaten, he asks that Filemon treat him as he would treat Paulus himself, even offering to pay Filemon for anything wrong that Onesimus might have done before he fled.

With an oath, Paulus assures Filemon that he will pay whatever debt Onesimus may owe, and yet he reminds Filemon that Filemon owes Paulus a debt as well -- probably something emotional rather than financial. Does this make them "even"?

Referring to Filemon again as "brother," he uses his word game another time, seeking to "profit" from Filemon's generosity. His is a gentle plea.

I am writing to you, persuaded of your listening, knowing that you will do even over what I am saying. Now at the same time also, prepare a place of lodging for me. For I hope that I will be freely given to you through your prayers.

Paulus concludes the body of the letter with an expression of confidence, adding that if he should be freed from bondage, he hopes to go to stay with Paulus -- perhaps allowing Paulus to work off Onesimus' debt.

Epafra, my fellow captive in Anointed Jesus, greets you. Markus, Aristarchus, Daemas, Lukas -- my coworkers-- greet you. The favor of Lord Anointed Jesus be with your spirit.

This is a typical, short conclusion. Again, Paulus references his prisoner status, referring also to his assistants.