I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.
C.S. Lewis

First Love Ministries, Inc., of Perry, Georgia
PRAYER STUDY #479
PHILEMON

…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. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.
Philemon 16-17

GENRE: A personal letter

AUTHOR: There is almost universal agreement that this book was written by the Apostle Paul.

SETTING: This letter is written from a Roman prison around AD 60 during Paul's first imprisonment, where he was basically house bond.

PLOT SUMMARY: The imprisoned Paul has apparently converted a runaway slave, Onesimus and wants to send him back to Philemon, the slave owner. Philemon is a friend of Paul's living in Colosse.

THEME: From bondage to brotherhood: Christian brotherly love really works, even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty, and a slave can be redeemed by Christ and by brotherly love and forgiveness and transformed into a brother or sister in the Lord.

CHARACTERS

1. PAUL THE APOSTLE: Perhaps the greatest Christian that ever lived, Paul identifies himself in this letter as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.
2. PHILEMON: A well-to-do citizen of Colosse who is the main person to whom the letter is addressed
3. TIMOTHY: a Christian brother who Paul loved as a son and who is said to have become the Bishop of the Church at Ephesus
4. APPHIA: Thought to be Philemon's wife
5. ARCHIPPUS: Thought to be Philemon's son
6. PHILEMON'S HOUSE CHURCH: This letter was not only for Philemon but was to be shared with the whole house church that met in Philemon's home.
7. ONESIMUS: A runaway slave who apparently stole from his master and made a trip of over 1000 miles to the city of Rome but there found Christ through the ministry of Paul-About fifty years after Philemon is written, Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs stops in Smyrna and writes to the church at Ephesus in which he praises their wonderful bishop. The name of the bishop is Onesimus. Could it be that the runaway slave with the passing years have been liberated by Philemon and had become the great Bishop of Ephesus?
8. EPAPHRAS: Paul's representative in Colossae, where he (Epaphras) founded the Colossian church and was noted in scripture as a giant in prayer and one who was perhaps a fellow prisoners of Paul-Perhaps Epaphras newly come from Colosse recognized Onesimus as a slave he had seen at Colosse, and then the whole story of Onesimus came out, making Paul realize that he could not harbor a runaway slave.
9. MARK: John Mark, the son of Mary, a godly and well-to-do widow in Jerusalem whose house was used for prayer meetings, was, we think (1st Peter 5:13), converted by Peter. He is thought to be "the certain young man (Mark 14:51),

who followed Christ when His disciples forsook Him and fled. He went on an early missionary journey with Paul and his uncle Barnabus, but could not take the pressure and returned home. This greatly angered Paul and caused a division between Barnabas and Paul when Paul refused to take Mark back on the next missionary journey. Eventually Mark was restored to Paul and was mentioned in 2nd Timothy 4:11 in a tribute from Paul about how useful he was to him. Tradition says that Mark became the Bishop of Venice and was martyred and buried there.

10. ARISTARCHUS: One of Paul's traveling companions from Thessalonica
11. DEMAS: Another Thessalonian and companion of Paul during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, who unfortunately left Paul because of his (Demas') love for the world (2nd Timothy 4:10).
12. LUKE: A "beloved physician", probably the brother of Titus, the author of most of the New Testament (Luke and Acts), a Gentile believer, and Paul's faithful traveling companion.

OTHER INFORMATION: This is the briefest of Paul's epistles and the most personal letter he wrote (of those which were canonized as scripture). Yet it is a powerful letter which shows Paul's loving concern for the forgiveness of one who otherwise would face the sentence of death. Onesimus, whose name means *profitable,* was formerly a deserter, thief, and worthless slave, but he had been transformed by the love of Christ into a brother to the Body of Christ and a son to Paul. Philemon is one of the four prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). Paul apparently expected during this time to be released at some point so that he could visit Colosse, a place where he had never been, although he knew some of the believers in Colosse and had probably led Philemon himself to Christ, when Philemon was visiting in Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey.

According to Roman law, runaway slaves were severely punished and often condemned to a violent death. Although he is not mentioned in Philemon, Tychicus might have accompanied Onesimus and probably took the letter to Philemon. We know that he took letters from Paul to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:21) and Colossians (Colossians 4:7) and fulfilled some mission for Paul in Crete (2nd Timothy 4:12, Titus 3:12). Paul spoke of Tychicus as "a brother beloved and faithful minister in the Lord" and able to "comfort your hearts."

THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY: Many find it offensive that Christianity did not come strongly against slavery at its beginning. A slave in Paul's day was not a person but a piece of property or a tool for a master, who had absolute power over his slaves. Slavery was a big thing all over the empire. There were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. If a slave ran away, at the very best he would be branded with a hot iron with the letter *F*, standing for *Fugitive.* At worse the slave would be crucified. To send Onesimus back was a great risk. Why then, does not Paul condemn *slavery* or at least tell Philemon to set him free?

Barclay comments on this: *"If Christianity had, in fact, given slaves any encouragement to leave their masters, nothing but tragedy could have followed. Any such revolt would have been savagely crushed; slaves who took their freedom would have been mercilessly punished; and Christianity would itself have been branded as revolutionary and subversive. Given the Christian faith, liberation was bound to come-but the time was not ripe; and to encourage slaves to hope for it and to seize it, would have done infinitely more harm than good…..What Christianity did was to introduce a new relationship between individuals in which all external differences were abolished. Christians are one body whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free (1st Corinthians 12:13). In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28)… If masters treat slaves as Christ would*

have treated them, and if slaves serve the masters as they would serve Christ, then the terms master and slave do not matter.

PhilemonAmplified Bible (AMP)

Salutation

1 *Paul, a prisoner [for the sake] of Christ Jesus (the Messiah, the Anointed), and our brother Timothy,*
To Philemon our dearly beloved friend and fellow worker, ***2*** *and to [your wife] Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier [in ministry], and to the church that meets in your house:* ***3*** *Grace to you and peace [inner calm and spiritual well-being] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is the only one of his epistles where Paul refers to himself as a *prisoner* of Jesus Christ. In seven of his epistles he calls himself *"an apostle."* In 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, he uses no title. In three he refers to himself as Christ's *servant* or *bondservant* (sometimes translated *bond slave)*, which is a person who has declared that he has absolutely no rights and is totally under the authority of his master. Note that he says a prisoner of *Christ,* not of Nero and Rome.

Paul also uses the phrase "*and our brother Timothy."* He includes Timothy in his salutation in 2nd Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and in 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. This inclusion shows the close relationship that he had with Timothy who was really like a son to him.

About all we know scripturally about Philemon is found in the words *To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker.* The phrase *dear friend* comes from a Greek word that means *loved* or *beloved*. *Fellow*

worker does not mean that Paul and Philemon worked together. It is Paul's way of saying that they were on the same level. Most probably Philemon was in charge of the church at Colosse, and Paul had met him when Paul was ministering in nearby Ephesus.

Most scholars believe that Apphia was Philemon's wife and that Archippus was his son. Archippus was probably in leadership, under his father, in the Colossian house church for Paul gave brief instructions, in his letter to the Colossians, for the Colossians to pass on to Archippus (Colossians 4:17).

The phrase "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"* is the usual Pauline greeting. It or a close variation of it is found in all of Paul's epistles.

Philemon's Love and Faith

4 *I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,* ***5*** *because I hear of your love and of your faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints (God's people).* ***6*** *I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective and powerful because of your accurate knowledge of every good thing which is ours in Christ.* ***7*** *For I have had great joy and comfort and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints (God's people) have been refreshed through you, my brother.*

8 *Therefore [on the basis of these facts], though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is appropriate,* ***9*** *yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner [for the sake] of*

Christ Jesus—

Every letter of Paul's, except Galatians, includes a note of thanksgiving. Paul says when he gave thanks (always), to whom (God), for whom (Philemon), and why (because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints). Paul is making a point here. Since Philemon has love for all the saints, he should love Onesimus also, who is now a brother and a saint.

What greater tribute could be said about us, as ministers, (and I believe in the priesthood of all believers, and that everyone is a minister), than we refresh God's people. The word used for refreshed is the Greek word anapepautai and is the same word used in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," meaning I will refresh you.

In verse 8 Paul is saying that, as an apostle, Paul could be bold and order Philemon to do what Paul wanted him to do. But Paul appeals instead to Philemon's love. He feels that, if Philemon really loves him, he also would love Onesimus and would receive him back and forgive him.

In those days older men had authority over younger men. And Paul was in prison so could not do more for Onesimus. He uses these terms to appeal to Philemon's sympathy for Paul's situation.

A Plea for Onesimus to be Freed

10 *I appeal to you for my [own spiritual] child Onesimus, whom I have fathered [in the faith] while a captive in these chains.* ***11*** *Once he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you as well as to*

*me. **12** I have sent him back to you in person, that is, like sending my very heart. **13** I would have chosen to keep him with me, so that he might minister to me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel; **14** but I did not want to do anything without first getting your consent, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. **15** Perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a while, so that you would have him back forever, **16** no longer as a slave, but [as someone] more than a slave, as a brother [in Christ], especially dear to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh [as a servant] and in the Lord [as a fellow believer].*

__17__ So if you consider me a partner, welcome and accept him as you would me. __18__ But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; __19__ I, Paul, write this with my [f]own hand, I will repay it in full (not to mention to you that you [g]owe to me even your own self as well). __20__ Yes, brother, let me have some benefit and joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

__21__ I write to you [perfectly] confident of your obedient compliance, [h]since I know that you will do even more than I ask.

__22__ At the same time also prepare a guest room for me [in expectation of a visit], for I hope that through your prayers I will be [granted the gracious privilege of] coming to you [at Colossae].

__23__ Greetings to you from Epaphras, my fellow prisoner here in [the cause of] Christ Jesus, __24__ and from Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

__25__ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your

spirit.

Paul, even though imprisoned, led Onesimus to Christ and considers Onesimus as a spiritual son. Onesimus, whose name means *profitable* or *useful*, by running away had become useless to Philemon. Now because of Onesimus' relationship with Christ, he had completely changed and was useful to both Paul and Philemon. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Philemon will not get Paul's letter until he is faced to face with Onesimus so he will have to decide right then what to do with Onesimus. Since Onesimus had become so close to Paul, how could Philemon deny Paul, his friend's, request. Paul wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus as Philemon would welcome Paul himself. Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him, but he knew that his Christian duty was to send Onesimus back. While Paul wanted to keep Onesimus, he did not want to take advantage of his relationship with Philemon. He wanted Philemon to voluntarily give Onesimus up. No one knows whether Philemon sent Onesimus back to Paul or not. Nor do we know whether Philemon freed Onesimus or retained him as a slave. At the very least Onesimus returned not only as a slave but as a brother to Philemon.

We do not know Onesimus' offense, but verse 18 hints that Onesimus might have stolen from Philemon's house. He certainly would have had to have money to make the long trip to Rome. Paul asked Philemon to charge Onesimus' financial obligations to Paul. This is symbolic, in a small way, of the substitutionary work of Christ on the Cross for you and me.

Because Paul requests that Philemon prepare a guest room for him, it seems that he thought he would be released from prison, something that did not happen. It also hints at Philemon's wealth.

Paul ends his letter sending greetings from those who are with him. He concludes all 13 epistles with a one-sentence benediction similar to the one here: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit.*

Suppertime Lyrics

When I was but a boy in days of childhood
I used to play till evening shadows come.
Then winding down an old familiar pathway
I heard my mother call at set of sun

Come home, come home
it's supper time
the shadows lengthen fast.
Come home, come home,
it's supper time
we're going home at last.

One day beside her bedside I was kneeling,
and angel wings were winnowing through the air.
She heard her call for supper time in heaven
and now I know she's waiting for me there.

Come home, come home
it's supper time
The shadows lengthen fast.
Come home, come home,
it's supper time,
we're going home at last.

In visions now I see her standing yonder,
and her familiar voice I hear once more.
The banquet table's ready up in heaven,
It's supper time upon that golden shore.

Come home, come home
it's supper time,
The shadows lengthen fast.
Come home, come home,
it's supper time,
we're going home at last.

We're going home at last.