

# Refreshing The Bowels Of The Brethren

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The epistle to Philemon is a tender treatise, which flowed deep from the heart of the apostle Paul. It is one of the five one-chapter books in the Bible. Though the book may be brief in the number of words employed by Paul, its message is deep, grand and massive. Practically speaking, Paul is asking a favor of this dear brother and friend. It is no shallow request, nor does it focus solely on Paul's behalf. He is petitioning Philemon on behalf of a new convert named Onesimus. Onesimus is no ordinary convert to Philemon, for Philemon was the owner of this man. Onesimus was a run away slave, who had come into contact with the apostle Paul, "perhaps" by the providence of God (Phi. 15), and was converted. With this epistle Paul is sending Onesimus home and encouraging Philemon to receive him properly.

In this epistle, Paul employs the use of a certain Greek word three times. The Greek word is σπλάγχνον, pronounced splanchnon. Literally, the word is defined "bowels, intestines, (the heart, lungs, liver, etc.)."<sup>1</sup> It is even used in its literal sense in some Old Testament passages and in Acts 1:18. "Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out."

In the New Testament, however, it is predominately used in a figurative sense. In 2 Corinthians 6:12 Paul wrote, "Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels." Paul's point seems to be that there is no lack of love on our part for you. You do not stand in a narrow position as far as our affections for you are concerned. However, I have not received the love and compassion from you that is reasonably expected. You have looked on me, the one who was responsible for your conversion, with less than an open heart of love. In this passage the word "bowels" is used in a figurative sense. Paul uses the word twice in Philippians. First he says, "For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ" (Phi. 1:8). Again Paul wrote, "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies" (Phi. 2:1). In both of these instances the term is used in a figurative sense just as it is in 1 John 3:17.

In Biblical times "the bowels were regarded as the seat of the more violent passions, such as anger and love; but by the Hebrews as the seat of the tenderer affections, especially kindness, benevolence, compassion; hence our heart (tender mercies, affections, etc.)."<sup>2</sup> This helps explain why another derivative of this word, σπλαγχνίζομαι, pronounced splanchnizomai, is translated compassion.

Understanding this figurative usage helps us to recognize the true tenderness of Paul's words here in Philemon. In verse 12 Paul said of Onesimus, "I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels." The term helps to define the reception Philemon should have for Onesimus. Paul's exhortation is not "Receive him in the same position he held when he left." But rather, it is "Receive him as one that is so near to, and loved by me; as one who springs forth from my very inner being." What could Philemon do? In Paul's other two usages in this epistle, we learn much about Philemon and about Paul's

expectation as far as Philemon's response were concerned. Paul said, "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother" (Phi. 7). It is obvious that Philemon was one who loved the brotherhood and was willing to show that love powerfully. This brother in Christ encouraged brethren. He was one that when others considered him and his life and his actions toward members of the church it brought joy to the heart. It must have been because of this knowledge that encouraged Paul to write, "Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord" (Phi. 1:20).

We can learn much from our brother Philemon. A child of God does well to take others into consideration. Especially is this true concern our brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as our faith can be seen by works, and our love by labor and our hope by patience, so too can our concern for our brethren be seen by the compassions that flow from our inner being (our bowels or our heart). May we all strive to be of such a disposition that it may be said of us, you, brother or sister refresh the bowels of the saints. Until next week, let us all study our Bibles more and more.

1 Thayers, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

2 Ibid.