

Paul's Letter to Philemon

Chapter 1 (only chapter)

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— 2 also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

After studying Colossians chapter 4, I decided it would be a good time to transition to Paul's letter to Philemon. The main characters were mentioned in Paul's letters to the Colossian church. This letter was also written while Paul was in prison in Rome.

So who was Philemon? In verse 1, Paul calls him a "*dear friend and fellow worker*". It also tells us that Philemon held church at his house. Based on the phrase "*you owe to me even your own self*", we can guess that Paul led Philemon to Christ.

If Colossae is anything like Ephesus, then Philemon would have had a large house. When Terry and I visited Ephesus, we toured the "Terrace Houses" which were for the very rich. They even had running water, mosaics on the walls, bathrooms and were all interconnected on the side of a hill. They would have been very lavish for the time. Church was believed to have been held in one of these Terrace Houses. This was what was believed to have happened in Colossae.

Philemon had at least one slave and that was Onesimus. Remember the name from Colossians 4? As we will learn, Onesimus did something bad against his master Philemon, but it doesn't really say what it was. Many believe that he stole money from Philemon and then ran away to Rome where he met Paul evidently both in prison.

Slaves were everywhere at this time. By many accounts, the slaves made up one third of the population of the Roman Empire. The slaves came from all walks of life. When one country, like the Romans, invaded another country many people were made into slaves and were transported back to Rome or to wherever they could be sold.

Paul included this letter to Philemon with Onesimus and the group that he was sending to Colossae. As you can guess, Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colossae because there has been a significant change in Onesimus' life. Just like Philemon, Paul had led Onesimus to Christ. The purpose of this letter was to get Onesimus to be reconciled back to Philemon.

Conflict is a family and church killer. That is why Paul wrote about husbands, wives, children and fathers in Colossians chapter 3. He included the master-slave relationship in that same section because of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was ruined by what

Onesimus had done. Conflict at home and in all relationships can impact the way that we worship. Paul saw the same thing in the church at Colossae. Conflict in your life also ruins your relationship with God.

In verse 1, Paul says that he is a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul didn't consider himself a prisoner of Rome. Remember, he was in prison in Rome because of the Jews that followed him in his ministry trying to refute what he was teaching. He was also there because of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that put him on trial a number of times. He truly believed that he ended up imprisoned in Rome under the leadership of Jesus. This is where he had been heading his whole life.

In verse 2, Paul sends his greetings to "*Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets at your home.*" Guzik says that Apphia is probably Philemon's wife and Archippus is probably Philemon's son.

Verse 3 is Paul's standard greeting, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

In these verses, Paul offers up a prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon and his church. Paul says "*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers*". Why? "*Because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.*" Where had Paul heard about Philemon's love? From Epaphras as we learned in Colossians 1. These verses are nearly a duplicate of how Paul started his letter to the Colossians.

Paul says that he is thankful that they have love for "all" believers and their faith in Jesus. Yes, as Christians we are suppose to have these things but holding on to these things is sometimes difficult. It would have been difficult holding on to these things while living under Roman rule. Today, churches are willing to separate or fall apart for less.

In verse 6, Paul says that he prays for their partnership with Paul's team. Remember much of the time Paul received funding from the churches in this region to keep his ministry moving. His trip to Rome was paid for by the Roman Empire but his traveling companions would have needed financial support to stay with him.

Faith and love should lead believers to be more generous. Evidently Philemon and his church were very generous at meeting Paul's needs, as well as helping other believers that traveled through the region. I would guess they helped others that were spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, too. Remember that in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church that he praised them for donating to the poor in Jerusalem.

In verse 7, Paul says that their *"love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people."* As part of the Deacon Board, we have given to numerous people in need. We are to be a blessing to others but there is rarely a time when we are not blessed by helping to provide assistance to others. It gives them a refreshed heart but we in turn receive a refreshed heart. We don't do it to get anything from it but we are blessed.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,[b] who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

Now here is the purpose for the whole letter. In verse 10, Paul says, *"that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus."* Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus. He wants the two of them to not just become master and slave again, he wants Onesimus to be forgiven and for them to become brothers in Christ. This is a huge ask of Philemon.

In verse 8, Paul says "I could make you reconcile with him but I won't." He says that he would prefer that Philemon would do it out of love. He wants them to reconcile out of Christ's love and not based on their past relationship.

If you take Christ out of the equation, reconciliation between a master and a slave that stole and then fled would be IMPOSSIBLE. Without Christ, regardless of what Onesimus took, it would have been more valuable than a slave's life to Philemon.

Paul humbles himself and pleads with Philemon as *"an old man in chains"* to take Onesimus back in love. What did Jesus say was the second greatest commandment? Love others as yourself. Does the kind of love that Paul is asking of Philemon go beyond reasonable?

Other masters would have said, "A master like Philemon should never give that kind of forgiveness to a mere slave!" Depending on what he did, the punishment could be death or at least imprisonment. Paul is asking Philemon to not just forgive him but to take him back not as a slave but as a brother. What?? In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul goes in to great detail about giving up

your personal rights for the sake of the gospel. This is part of what Paul is asking of Philemon but he wants it based on love.

In these verses can you feel the love that Paul has for both men. He calls Philemon a brother and now in verse 10 Paul is calling Onesimus his son. Onesimus has been elevated to a level similar to Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17) and Titus (Titus 1:4).

In verse 11, Paul says that previously Onesimus was useless to Philemon but now he is useful to both of us. The KJV and NKJV says “profitable” and “unprofitable”.

“When Paul spoke of Onesimus being unprofitable and profitable, he made a play on a word. The name Onesimus means *profitable*. Now that he was a Christian, Onesimus could live up to his name.” (Guzik)

2 Corinthians 12:10 says, “*That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” In Christ, if the weak can become strong then useless can become useful. Previously, Onesimus was just a common slave. It doesn’t say what his responsibilities were but in kingdom building for Christ, he would have been useless. Now as a Christian, a brother in Christ, then he would be truly useful, look how much Paul has relied on Timothy and Titus. They were viewed as an extension of Paul.

12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.

In verse 12, Paul says that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Depending on the translation, he adds that “In doing so, I am also sending my heart.” Remember that Paul called Onesimus his son. Paul knows that a vindictive master is well within his rights to put Onesimus to death. Guzik says “even crucify him.”

“Roman law... practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offenses than this.” (Lightfoot)

Paul points out in verse 13 that he preferred to keep Onesimus with him in his imprisonment. This suggests that Onesimus was tending to Paul’s needs or doing things that Paul could not do for himself. This could be because of the imprisonment or Paul’s age. At the time of this letter, Paul is around 60 years old. Reaching that age was rarer than you would expect in the first century.

In verse 13, Paul also reminds him and us that Paul was imprisoned for the gospel. It wasn't for robbery or murder or some kind of evil. It was because he preached the gospel, salvation through Jesus, grace through faith.

In verse 14, Paul realizes that in order to make things right with Philemon, he must send Onesimus back. Paul cannot keep Onesimus in Rome with him because Onesimus literally belongs to Philemon. Paul wants to do what is right even it kills Onesimus.

This letter is full of pleading on Paul's part for Onesimus' life. Even when he is not saying it, he is implying it. Paul is trusting God and Philemon but he is still willing to plead and pray for things to work out the way that he wants. He finishes these verses with "What you decide is of your own choice, I am not forcing you to do anything."

15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

In verse 15, Paul suggests that what occurred in the past between Philemon and Onesimus was divine providence. Just so you know, Google AI defines 'Divine providence is the belief that God governs and cares for the universe, ensuring all events align with a divine plan. It suggests that God is in control, working all things for good, even seemingly negative events.'

Paul is saying that what occurred didn't just occur out of dumb luck. God had a plan. The plan included Onesimus meeting Paul and coming to Christ. I am not talking about the idea of predestination but I believe sometimes God aligns things to accomplish his plan for our lives.

Consider Paul's life, he studied under Gamaliel and became an expert at Jewish Law. He persecuted Christians because they weren't following the Law. Then he met Jesus on the Damascus road where he was humbled by Jesus for his persecuting them. Then he was persecuted by Jews and preached salvation by grace through faith and not by the Law. Dumb luck, I don't think so.

Remember Romans 8:28. *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* God works for good things to happen in our lives even when bad things occur to us. The bad thing that happened here was Onesimus' doing something bad to Philemon, like stealing and running away. God makes it possible for him to meet Paul and be introduced to the gospel message. Life changing.

Paul says that Onesimus was a slave but now he can be a brother, a brother in Christ. Back in verse 11, Paul says that he was changed from 'useless' to 'useful'. The change occurred when

Onesimus accepted Christ. In Colossians 3:23 we read, “*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters*”. Work as if you are working for Jesus should make a huge difference in your work habits and make you extremely useful. Also as Christians, they could work together to accomplish even more for the Lord.

There is a hymn, “Since Jesus came into my life”. The first verse says, “What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought Since Jesus came into my heart! I have light in my soul for which long I had sought, Since Jesus came into my heart!” Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*”

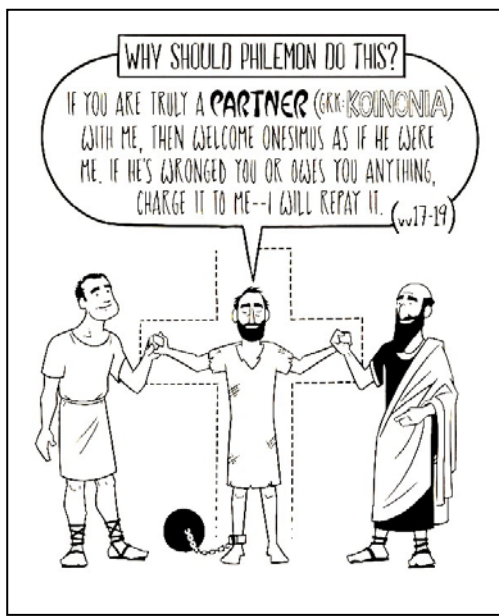
In verse 16, Paul says that Onesimus should no longer be treated “*as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.*” This letter from Paul to Philemon contained a huge ask, for the time this was unheard of. Paul asks him to not just accept Onesimus back as a slave, but as a brother. Just to bring him back as a slave was a big ask. Remember, he stole from Philemon or at least did something bad and then ran away. At that time, slaves were nothing more than a possession.

Paul points out that Onesimus should be welcomed back to Colossae not just as a member of the church but “*even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.*” Paul keeps heaping on his expectations for the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

Consider in your employment, what would happen if you walked away from your job for a significant time. Then you came back and not only asked for your job back but ask for a promotion too. You would get laughed out of your boss’ office, assuming you got in to it in the first place.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

In
of



verse 17, Paul says consider me a ‘partner’. The Greek words used for ‘partner’ is ‘*koinōnos*’. In 1 Peter 1:5, Peter uses that same word in the phrase, “*a ‘partaker’ also of the glory that is to be revealed*”.(NASB) He puts himself in the middle of the conversation.

“Paul’s appeal is powerful because he stood beside a guilty man and said to the owner of the slave, “I know this man is a criminal and deserves punishment. Yet this slave is my friend, so if you punish him punish me also. I stand beside him to take his punishment.” This is what Jesus does for us before our master, God the Father.” (Guzik)

Tim Mackie -This clip was taken from a video, created by The Bible Project, explores Paul's letter to Philemon.

In verse 19, Paul says that if Onesimus still owes Philemon anything or needs anything further, his account belongs to me. Put it on my tab. This is the true picture of Jesus. He will say something similar to God the Father on our behalf. “John doesn’t owe any sin debt. He is mine. Mark it paid in full.”

In verse 20, Paul tells us that paying Onesimus’ debt would give him joy. If Philemon and Onesimus would be reconciled to each other, it would please him and “refresh” him. Think about it. How do you feel when you help resolve a dispute? To me it refreshes my faith in my fellow man. We see too little of this today, so much hatred.

He says, “*refresh my heart in Christ.*” What did Jesus say in the Lord’s prayer about forgive us our trespasses”? We ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. Ephesians 4:32 says, “*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*” We are to remember that what we pray and read in God’s Word are more than words. It refreshes Paul to know that Philemon is living proof of that fact.

In verse 21, Paul uses a polite way of saying “Git-R-done” to quote Larry the Cable Guy. This almost sounds like an initial directive from a parent to a teenage child. “I am sure that you will accomplish everything that I have asked.” If need be, the parent will elevate the authoritative sound in his voice.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

In verse 22, Paul tells Philemon to “*Prepare a guest room for him.*” There is no evidence in the Bible that Paul ever made the trip to Colossae to visit him.

Acts 28:30-31 contain the last information about Paul in the Bible. It says, “*For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and*

without hindrance!” Some historians say that Paul was released by Nero and he made his way on to Spain. None of this is documented in the Bible.

“The early church historian Eusebius writing about AD 325 supported this with his claim that Paul’s martyrdom was not during the period described in the book of Acts.” Paul’s 4th Missionary Journey (And I Don’t Mean His Trip to Rome) Kenneth Berding. He further contends that Paul made a 4th missionary journey, was then captured, returned to Rome and was beheaded. I am not a historian so I don’t know.

In verses 23 and 24, Paul tells Philemon that everyone else says “Hi”. The same group of men that were with Paul at the end of the letter to the Colossians, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke are all with Paul. Tychicus was traveling with Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae.

Finally, verse 25 is Paul standard ending, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*” Paul also ends his letter to the Philippians and the Galatians this way. He closes with a blessing from God on these churches and to Philemon.

As Paul Harvey would say, “And now the rest of the story.” The letter to Philemon is so short, “Why is this little letter included in the Bible?” David Guzik says:

“In A.D. 110, the bishop of Ephesus was named Onesimus, and it could have been this same man. If Onesimus was in his late teens or early twenties when Paul wrote this letter, he would then be about 70 years old in A.D. 110 and that was not an unreasonable age for a bishop in those days.”

“Ignatius, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, maketh mention of Onesimus, as pastor of Ephesus, next after Timothy. The Roman Martyrologue saith, that he was stoned to death at Rome, under Trajan the emperor.” (Trapp)

“There is also some historical evidence that the letters of Paul were first gathered as a group in the city of Ephesus. Perhaps Onesimus first compiled the letters and wanted to make sure *his* letter — his charter of freedom — was included.”