

Philemon Bible Study

January 25, 2003

PURPOSE:

To convince Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus, and to accept him as a brother in the faith based on an appeal Philemon's faith, love and grace in Christ.

AUTHOR:

Paul: The solution to evil, to life and the problems of life is the use of personal freedom and free will. So Paul's thesis is that the solution resides in mankind's soul in the form of free will. For if Paul commands or coerces Philemon into forgiving and freeing Onesimus, then Paul has freed Onesimus but made a slave of Philemon. The problem persists. So Paul recognizes that Philemon must decide on his own, through his own free will, what is right to do.

TO WHOM WRITTEN:

Philemon, who was probably a wealthy member of the Colossian church, and all believers

DATE WRITTEN:

About A.D. 60, during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, at about the same time Ephesians and Colossians were written

SETTING:

Slavery was very common in the Roman empire, and evidently some Christians had slaves. Paul does not condemn the institution of slavery in his writings, but he makes a radical statement by calling this slave Philemon's brother in Christ. We're all the same in the sight of God. No favorites.

KEY PEOPLE:

Paul, Philemon, Onesimus (Fill-lee-mon) (O-nes-i-mus)

Colossians: 4:7-17 has some of the same people and written at same location

KEY PLACES:

Colosse (Co-los-ee), Rome

SPECIAL FEATURES:

This is a private, personal letter to a friend

Private or Public letter? Did Paul know millions would read this letter?

Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures were littered with barriers, as society assigned people to classes and expected them to stay in their place -- men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, pious (pie-us) (exhibiting religious reverence) and pagan. But with the message of Christ, the walls came down, and Paul could declare, 'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all' (Colossians 3:11).

This small book is a masterpiece of grace and tact and a profound demonstration of the power of Christ and of true Christian fellowship in action. What barriers are in your home, neighborhood, and church? What separates you from fellow believers -- race? status? wealth? education? personality? As with Philemon, God calls you to seek unity, breaking down those walls and embracing your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul pleads on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul's intercession for him illustrates what Christ has done for us. As Paul interceded for a slave, so Christ intercedes for us, slaves to sin. As Onesimus was reconciled to Philemon, so we are reconciled to God through Christ. As Paul offered to pay the debts of a slave, so Christ paid our debt of sin. Like Onesimus, we must return to God our Master and serve him.

THEME: Forgiveness

EXPLANATION: Philemon was Paul's friend and the legal owner of the slave, Onesimus. Paul asked him not to punish Onesimus, but to forgive and restore him as a new Christian brother.

IMPORTANCE: Christian relationships must be full of forgiveness and acceptance. Can you forgive those who have wronged you?

Barriers

Slavery was widespread in the Roman empire, but no one is lost to God or beyond his love. Slavery was a barrier between people, but Christian love and fellowship are to overcome such barriers. In Christ we are one family. No walls of racial, economic or political differences should separate us. Let Christ work through you to remove barriers between Christian brothers and sisters.

Respect

Paul was a friend of both Philemon and Onesimus. He had the authority as an apostle to tell Philemon what to do. Yet Paul chose to appeal to his friend in Christian love rather than to order him what to do. Tactful persuasion accomplishes a great deal more than commands when dealing with people. Remember to exhibit courtesy and respect in your relationships.

Characters in Philemon

Paul – (little, small or “release from sin”) was Saul (asked for) before his conversion, one of the apostles, (he had seen the Lord), writer of the Letter to Philemon and 12 other books in the New Testament, from Romans to Philemon. He was imprisoned in Rome, by the Roman government. Jewish name was Saul and Roman name Paul. Paul wanted to be known as “Little One” in Christ Service. Paul is immured in his first Roman imprisonment by Nero in approximately 62AD. Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, son of Jewish parents. There exists no infallible description of the great Apostle Paul but the book “The Acts of Paul ...” Describe him thusly, “baldheaded, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, full of grace, for at time he looked like a man and at times he had the face of an angel.”

Philemon – “fill-lee-mon” (affectionate) a well to do prosperous Christian, a member of the church in Colossae, probably had a church in his home.

Onesimus – “o-nes-i-mus” (profitable or useful) was a slave of Philemon and had apparently stolen money from his master, Philemon, and fled to Rome where he meet the Apostle Paul and had become a Christian. It seems that Onesimus was helping Paul in his ministry, but Paul was sending Onesimus back to his master with a letter asking for forgiveness. Stealing and running away from your master in those days was punishable by death. Onesimus was taking his life into his own hands trying to go back and be forgiven opposed to being put to death. Was his name changed after becoming a Christian?

Timothy – (venerating God) was one of Paul’s most constant companions in the ministry, and was with Paul when Paul wrote Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

Apphia – “app-fee-er” Philemon’s wife

Archippus – “art-a-bus” (master of the horse) a Christian minister at Colossae and may have been a member of Philemon’s household. (see Colossians 4:17)

Epaphras – “epp-a-hras” a teacher and Pastor in the church of Colossae and some say he may have started the church in Colossae. He helped hold the church together in spite of growing persecution and struggles.

Mark – a Christian Jew, one of the apostles, wrote the gospel of Mark and may be known as John Mark.

Aristarchus – “air-i-stark-us” (the best ruler) apparently was ministering with Paul in Rome as a Christian brother.

Demas – “Dem-us” a companion of the Apostle Paul, and later, deserted him. II Timothy 4:10

Luke – one of Paul’s fellow workers and the author of the Gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts. He was also a physician. Luke seemed to be very detailed in his writings.

Locations

Colossae – Colossae was the home of many Jews, and the major industry in Colossae revolved around collossinus, a type of wool which was purple in color.

Evil

Two things were here before we were; and two things will still be here after we leave; The Word of God or Bible Doctrine and evil. Both can change you, but you cannot change them. And both sin and slavery are part of evil. Slavery is a social problem; it is evil; it denies free will. The question, then, as posed by the Apostle

Paul is, how do you fight evil? And the answer is: with God's Word. Paul's aim, then, is to influence Philemon with God's way, grace, rather than Satan's way, evil and coercion.

~Salutation – A polite expression of greeting or goodwill. Letter started as we end them today.

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,

Paul wrote this letter from Rome in about A.D. 60, when he was under house arrest (see Act 28:30, 31). Onesimus was a domestic slave who belonged to Philemon, a wealthy man and a member of the church in Colosse. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and had made his way to Rome where he met Paul, who apparently led him to Christ (verse 10). Paul convinced Onesimus that running from his problems wouldn't solve them, and he persuaded Onesimus to return to his master. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to ask him to be reconciled to his runaway slave.

2 and to Apphia (app-fee-er) our sister, and to Archippus “(Arch-a-bus) master of the horse” our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

The addressee was not only this Christian family, but the church in their home. It was customary, and sometimes necessary, for the local churches to assemble in the home of one of the members.

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

~Philemon's Love and Faith

4 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,

Paul reflected on Philemon's faith and love. Philemon had opened his heart and his home to the church. We should do likewise, opening ourselves and our homes to others, offering Christian fellowship to refresh people's hearts.

5 because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;

Paul acknowledges Philemon's spiritual maturity. Love for God depends upon a knowledge of God's Word, i.e., the more you know someone, the more you love them.

6 and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

A believer must have proper perception of the good that he has in Christ. The verse is difficult; Philemon's ministry was energized by his apprehension of Christian love and truth. Paul rejoices in this and desires that this motivation may influence Philemon's attitude toward his runaway slave.

7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Paul respects and loves both Philemon and Onesimus; both have been a 'ministry of refreshment' to Paul

8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper,

Because Paul was an elder and an apostle, he could have used his authority with Philemon, commanding him to deal kindly with his runaway slave. But Paul based his request not on his own authority, but on Philemon's Christian commitment. Paul wanted Philemon's heartfelt, not grudging, obedience. When you know something is right and you have the power to demand it, do you appeal to your authority or to the other person's commitment? Here Paul provides a good example of how to deal with a possible conflict between Christian friends. The function of the gift of Apostleship was to support the Church during its formative years, i.e., during

the first century AD, until the Canon Scripture was completed. The Apostles had complete authority over all the local churches. All of the apostles to the Church had to be eye witnesses to the resurrected Christ.

9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you - since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus -

~Plea for Onesimus, a Free Man

10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,
Begotten – to father, to cause to exist or occur, produce.

Paul refers to his convert as begotten by him. Although a slave in a Christian household, presumably Onesimus did not embrace the Christian faith until as an escapee he came under the influence of Paul. As a Christian, Onesimus, (a not uncommon name for a slave in that time and region), who formerly was useless, now lived up to his name. John Knox speculates that Paul may have given the name "Onesimus" to the slave at his conversion.

A master had the legal right to kill a runaway slave, so Onesimus feared for his life. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to help him understand his new relationship with Onesimus. Onesimus was now a Christian brother, not a mere possession. "Who became my son" means that Onesimus had become a Christian.

11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

Onesimus means "useful." Paul used a play on words, saying that Onesimus had not been much use to Philemon in the past, but had become very useful to both Philemon and Paul. Although Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him, he was sending Onesimus back, requesting that Philemon accept him not only as a forgiven runaway servant, but also as a brother in Christ. In other words, that which was formerly useless use less, Onesimus is now by the grace of God and salvation, "useful", just like the name. Onesimus is useful to both Paul and Philemon.

12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,

The verb translated sent back can have the technical judicial meaning of "to refer a case," i.e., to allow Philemon himself to judge in the matter of Onesimus' freedom. But the ordinary meaning is more probable here. Paul equates sending the slave with sending my very heart.

13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

Onesimus had been of considerable help to Paul in his bonds or imprisonment for the gospel. The apostle desired to retain his services - services which Philemon would have gladly approved. But Paul, being sensitive to the ethics of the situation, refused to presume upon Philemon's love. He wanted his friend to make up his own mind and act willingly, without being manipulated or forced into a corner. When a man performs some 'Christian service' because friends have made it difficult for him to say no, his service is not genuinely Christian. Did Philemon free Onesimus and send him back to Paul? Did the former slave become a minister and, later, bishop of the church at Ephesus, some think so. While no certain answer can be given to these questions, the supposition raised by them is appealing.

14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,

Philemon was both brother and master; Onesimus was both brother and slave. Such dual relationships gave rise to difficult problems within the early church. And such problems still complicate the economic and social relations of Christians today.

Slavery was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. In these early days, Christians did not have the political power to change the slavery system. Paul didn't condemn or condone slavery, but he worked to transform relationships. The gospel begins to change social structures by changing the people within those structures.

Business relationships often categorize and separate people. Christian love joins all people in the Christian family. Paul did not comment on the rightness or wrongness of the institution of slavery. Instead he provided a basis for overcoming the social barriers of business relationships and ultimately of doing away with slavery. To treat another person as a brother makes owning a person as a slave impossible.

Some believers will not respond to the gospel or grace until challenged by a serious situation, this is a spiritual principle.

16 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.

Paul recognizes that Onesimus, although now a great believer, is still a slave and is still subject to Philemon's authority and the laws of Rome. This explains Paul's use of "in the flesh" and "in the Lord." For if God has no authority, then mankind has no free-will with which to accept salvation.

17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

Having related the story and having gently restated some Christian principles, Paul now makes a direct appeal: "Receive Onesimus as you would myself, for your sake I would keep him in thy stead (Phm 13), but rather I send him to you in my stead. Not only a fellow Christian, but one with whom many experiences had been shared.

Paul genuinely loved Onesimus. Paul showed his love by personally guaranteeing payment for any stolen goods or wrongs for which Onesimus might be responsible. Paul's investment in the life of this new believer certainly encouraged and strengthened Onesimus's faith. Are there young believers who need you to demonstrate such self-sacrifice toward them? Be grateful when you can invest in the lives of others, helping them with Bible study, prayer, encouragement, support, and friendship.

18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

Paul admits by his use of the first class conditional clauses, that Onesimus has wronged Philemon, and could never pay back the large sum of money he stole.

19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Philemon owed himself to Paul, meaning that Paul had led Philemon to Christ. Because Paul was Philemon's spiritual father, he was hoping that Philemon would feel a debt of gratitude that he would repay by accepting Onesimus with a spirit of forgiveness.

20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul allows Philemon his free-will—there is no demand, or coercion. Paul only wants to be refreshed Philemon to reflect the image of Christ to everyone.

By showing Christian love to Onesimus, Philemon would refresh and bring joy to Paul himself. On this note the apostle rests his appeal in confidence of a good response

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

More than I say. This may refer to (1) giving Onesimus his freedom or (2) returning him to Paul. This may mean that Paul looks for Philemon to free Onesimus from his status of slave and this is done only in Philemon's spiritual free-will.

22 At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

Paul's trust that he will be released from this imprisonment echoes his sentiment. Through your prayers. It is noteworthy that the apostle who is most insistent about the sovereignty of God is equally convinced that God accomplishes His purposes through human instruments. The apostle does not request prayer; he takes for granted that his "partner" (Phm 17) remembers him in his prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, (epp-a-hras)

Epaphras was well known to the Colossians because he had founded the church there (Col 1:7). He was a hero to this church, helping to hold it together in spite of growing persecution and struggles with false doctrine. His report to Paul about the problems in Colosse had prompted Paul to write his letter to the Colossians. Epaphras's greetings to and prayers for the Colossian Christians reveal his deep love for them (Col 4:12, 13). He may have been in prison with Paul for preaching the gospel.

24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. (air-i-stark-us)

Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are also mentioned in Col 4:10, 14. Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Act 12:25 ff). Mark also wrote the Gospel of Mark. Luke had accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey and was the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Demas had been faithful to Paul for a while but then deserted him (see 2Ti 4:10).

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

“God is never wrong, has never been wrong, and never will be wrong”

About 100 years ago William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army said, “The chief danger of the 20th century will be: RELIGION WITHOUT THE HOLY GHOST, FORGIVENESS WITHOUT REPENTANCE, SALVATION WITHOUT REGENERATION, AND HEAVEN WITHOUT HELL.



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Dewey E. Fox, Servant of our Christ Jesus