

PHILEMON

FORGIVENESS



Grace Baptist Church

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Philemon

Philemon was a letter written by Paul around AD 60-62 to Philemon, a prominent member of the Colosse church. The local church in Colosse met in Philemon's house. Judging from the fact that he owned slaves and had a home large enough for a group of believers to meet in, indicates that Philemon was a wealthy man.

It is believed that Philemon was saved through the ministry of Paul in Ephesus, which was 100 miles toward the coast from Colosse. It is commonly believed that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus was Philemon's son. Onesimus, the other central individual of Paul's letter to Philemon, was one of Philemon's slaves. He had stolen money and/or property from Philemon and fled to Rome as a run-away slave to escape detection.

At some point, under some circumstance, through the sovereignty and providence of God, Onesimus comes in contact with the ministry of Paul in Rome. Through this contact Onesimus comes to know Jesus Christ as personal Savior; then begins to help Paul in his ministry in Rome.

Paul quickly grew to love Onesimus because of his help and support to him personally as well as to his ministry. Paul had a desire to keep Onesimus with him in Rome, but Paul realized that Onesimus had a responsibility to Philemon to confess and make restitution for his theft. Paul knew that he could not keep Onesimus in Rome because it would be an act of condoning the actions of Onesimus, which would interfere with his relationship with Philemon. Onesimus had both broken Roman law and defrauded Philemon, his master; thus Paul deemed it necessary and right to demand that Onesimus return to Philemon.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Colosse with Tychicus. He did this to protect Onesimus from professional slave-catchers (bounty hunters),

which could have occurred if he traveled alone. This also helped prevent Onesimus from failing to return to Philemon.

Paul wrote a letter, which was carried by Onesimus, to Philemon that explained the situation with Onesimus. In this letter he asks Philemon to forgive and treat Onesimus as a brother-in-Christ, not as a run-away slave. Paul uses this letter to seek a transformed relationship between master and slave. Paul was basing the letter on the reality of Gal. 3:28 – “there is neither...slave nor free...in Christ Jesus”.

Philemon 1: Paul begins his letter with a personal salutation that identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul did not call himself “an apostle” in this salutation as he had done in 7 of his other letters. It is believed that Paul did not use “apostle” in this letter because this letter was a letter of gentleness, appeal, and request, not a letter of commands.

Paul identified Timothy as a brother with him in Rome. Timothy’s name is included in the salutation in 5 of Paul’s letters.

Paul addresses Philemon, to whom the letter is written. Philemon was a believer in Colosse who was a close friend to Paul. It is evident that Paul and Philemon respected and loved one another. Paul considered Philemon to be a “fellow worker”, one equal to himself in spreading the gospel message. Paul was in Rome, Philemon was in Colosse, but his work was producing fruit in Colosse just as Paul’s work was producing fruit in Rome.

Philemon 2: Paul also addresses as “dear friends” Apphia and Archippus, which most believe were Philemon’s wife and son. It is interesting that Paul specifically addresses Apphia as Apphia may have been directly impacted by Onesimus’ theft. It was the custom of the day for the wife to have day-to-day control and oversight for the slaves in the household, so the theft by Onesimus could have come under her watch.

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Archippus was in a position of authority in the Colosse church, as Paul refers to him as a “fellow soldier”. He may have been the leader and/or pastor of the Colosse church while Epaphras was in Rome with Paul. Paul gave instructions to Archippus in Col. 4:17 as to his work in Colosse.

Paul also addresses “the church that meets in your (Philemon’s) home”. By including them in the letter, they were invited to be involved in the appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus. Paul did this to get and keep them involved as a group together so no division or gossip would occur when they saw Onesimus return to Colosse and Philemon. By including them in the salutation, the letter would be read to all of them. Paul wanted this so they could learn from the situation and it provided accountability to Philemon for his response to Paul’s appeal and request.

Philemon 3: Paul greets them with his standard greeting, the same greeting he used in 6 of his letters. It is important to understand the order of the words of his greeting. “Grace” comes before “peace”. The word “peace” describes the spiritual state of a man’s relationship with God when that relationship is reconciled through Christ. It is the effect of only one cause, the “grace of God”. Peace with God comes from faith (Rms. 5:1). The peace of God comes from the infilling ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18, Gal. 5:22-23).

Philemon 4-7: Paul uses the customary first-century commendation to the reader in the opening of this letter. Paul does this to develop a foundation for his appeal to Philemon.

Paul expresses his thanksgiving to Philemon; thanking God for him as he prays. He tells Philemon that he has heard of his faith in Christ and his love for all the believers (saints). Undoubtedly this message of Philemon’s faith and love came from Epaphras to Paul. Philemon’s love was a manifestation of his faith toward and in the Lord Jesus.

Paul expands on Philemon's faith in verse 6 and his love in verse 7. The term "sharing" in verse 6 has a wide range of meaning, including the ideas of generosity, partnership, and fellowship in the sense of a mutual sharing of all life. This "sharing" comes from the common faith and share life that believers have in Christ. Paul's desire was for Philemon that as he gained in a fuller understanding of his blessings in Christ he would become more active in sharing Christ with others. The more a believer comprehends all he has in Christ, the more eager he should be to share Christ with others.

Paul expresses his joy for the love that is being demonstrated by Philemon in verse 7. Philemon's love resulted in joy and encouragement for Paul. Philemon's love was being publicly demonstrated in such a way that it had "refreshed" the "hearts" of the believers. The word translated "refreshed" is the same word translated as "rest" in Matt. 11:28, where Jesus said – "come unto Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest". The Greek word translated "refreshed / rest" comes from a military term that describes an army at rest from a march. The word "hearts" is not the normal Greek word for "heart" but rather is the Greek word for "the inner parts of the body". This Greek word denotes the source of emotion; the seat of human feelings. This was a deep emotional term that Paul used as he described the results of Philemon's love for the believers. Paul closes the commendation to Philemon by calling Philemon – "brother".

Philemon 8: Paul begins his appeal to Philemon with a word associated with a command or a required application of the previous written words – "therefore". Paul had highlighted and commended Philemon's demonstrated love for all saints in the opening of the letter. Now he is appealing to Philemon (through the word "therefore") that he extend his love toward Onesimus, his run-away slave. Paul stated that he could be bold (literally "courageous and confident in Christ") and order Philemon to do what he ought to do - forgive and accept Onesimus – but he would not do that.

Philemon 9: Instead of commanding Philemon to accept Onesimus, Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love to accept Onesimus. For Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him back would be a great demonstration of love for both Onesimus and Paul (and for all who would be observing).

Paul does something that is unusual, he challenges Philemon and seeks to motivate him further by appealing to his sense of compassion and sympathy by referring to his age ("an old man", "the aged") and his imprisonment. Paul was about 60 years old when he wrote this letter, but he had experienced many physical trials during his ministry which created the need for Luke to be with him to minister to his physical needs. Philemon was aware of this. Paul also used the reference to age because he was older than Philemon and there was an implied respect and authority with Paul because of his age.

Paul's reference to his imprisonment was an indication to Philemon that he was unable to do much for Onesimus as he was confined and unable to personally visit Philemon...and he had to rely on Philemon to respond properly without his being there to guide him through his response.

Philemon 10-11: Paul writes an appeal, not a command, to Philemon for his "son" (literally "my own child"), Onesimus. Paul called Onesimus his "son", a term of endearment Paul only used with Timothy and Titus. This is an indication of the relationship that Paul and Onesimus had built. Paul states that Onesimus became his "son" while Paul was in prison because it was then that Onesimus placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior... through Paul's ministry. Paul thought of himself as Onesimus' spiritual father. They now had a spiritual "father-son" relationship....the same "father-son" relationship that Paul had with Philemon.

Onesimus means "useful" or "profitable". When he stole money and/or property from Philemon, Onesimus became "useless" or

“unprofitable” to Philemon. Paul is now telling Philemon that Onesimus is no longer “useless” but rather is “useful”; “Useful formerly was useless but now is useful”. Paul writes that Onesimus is now useful to both of them.

Philemon 12-14: Paul then passes the issue to Philemon – “I am sending him back to you”. Philemon would not have the opportunity to think over Paul’s appeal without Onesimus being present. Instead Philemon would have to consider Paul’s appeal with Onesimus standing before him as the bearer of Paul’s letter and appeal.

Paul asks Philemon in the letter to receive Onesimus as he was Paul’s “own heart” or “my very heart”. Paul is appealing to the relationship that he had with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. It was Paul’s desire to keep Onesimus in Rome to help him. Paul wrote that if Onesimus would have stayed in Rome to help him, he would have served in Philemon’s place. In making this statement, Paul indicates that Onesimus and Philemon were equals in helping him in his ministry.

Paul could have used the assistance in prison – “in chains for the gospel”. It would have been easy to keep Onesimus in Rome and written a letter to Philemon. But Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon because he was the property of Philemon. The retention of someone’s slave by someone other than the owner could not be done under Roman law unless the owner had given permission. Paul did not want to force Philemon into a decision or take advantage of their friendship in regard to Onesimus staying with Paul. Paul desired that Philemon would voluntarily offer Onesimus to Paul; Paul wanted Philemon to release Onesimus from his ownership so he could help Paul in his ministry. It is not know if this occurred as the response to the appeal is not recorded.

Philemon 15-16: Paul now suggests that God providentially allowed the events between Philemon and Onesimus to occur for the purpose of overturning the sin of Onesimus into eventual good, i.e. the evil

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done to Joseph resulted in the eventual good (Gen. 45:8, 50:20). Paul told Philemon that his temporary loss of Onesimus has now resulted in his permanent return – both as a slave here on earth and as a brother in heaven.

Paul contrasted Onesimus’ status as a slave owned by Philemon with his new relationship to Philemon as a brother. It is important to look at the structure of Paul’s words here. Paul could have said to Philemon that Onesimus was “no longer a slave”, which would have been a command to Philemon to free Onesimus. Instead Paul wrote that Onesimus was “no longer as a slave”, which, through the use of the word “as”, allowed Philemon more freedom to choose an action and make a decision. Paul wanted Philemon to choose the right thing to do – for Philemon, Onesimus, Paul, and the church at Colosse.

Paul desired that Philemon accept Onesimus as a fellow believer – “a brother”, which was more important than the master in a master-slave relationship. Paul expected a transformed relationship between Philemon and Onesimus based on the fact that Onesimus was now a brother in the Lord to Philemon. This transformed relationship was to be evidenced in this physical life on earth (“in the flesh”) because the master-slave relationship now had spiritual unity and fellowship as together they worshipped their common Lord and Savior (“in the Lord”) as brothers.

Philemon 17: Paul explicitly asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back. If (since) Philemon considered Paul a partner and would have welcomed him into his home, Paul is asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus just as he would have welcomed Paul. The Greek word translated “partner” is from the root Greek word that means “partnership, fellowship, or sharing”.

Paul desires that the love in Philemon, which has been described earlier, be expressed to Onesimus through a restored relationship. As God has received the believer for the sake of Christ, the believer is to

receive one another. This was Paul's desire for Philemon and Onesimus.

Philemon 18: Paul now makes an offer to Philemon. Onesimus may have stolen money and/or material goods from Philemon, which was an offense that would have "wronged" Philemon and would have caused Onesimus to "owe" Philemon. In addition, Onesimus probably cost Philemon money because of lost services to Philemon and the cost of replacing him, which was an additional offense that caused Onesimus to "owe" Philemon even more.

Paul did not castigate Onesimus for doing wrong in the letter to Philemon. Instead, Paul simply acknowledges the wrong and states that Onesimus may owe Philemon for his actions. Paul then asks Philemon to charge (impute / reckon – a legal accounting term) Onesimus' financial obligations to his account. Paul was telling Philemon that he was going to be accountable to pay Onesimus' debt.

This is an illustration of imputation and substitution. Paul was not involved in any way with the wrongful acts of Onesimus, yet he was taking Onesimus' place before Philemon and was assuming his debt to Philemon. This is what occurs with Christ and the believer. Jesus was not involved in any way with the wrongful acts (sin) of man, yet He took man's place before God and assumed (and paid) man's debt and penalty for sin. As man, if we believe in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, by grace through faith, we escape the judgment for sin, which is eternal death.

Philemon 19: Paul then takes an extra step at this point in the letter....he takes the stylus from Timothy or Luke and signs his own name in the letter. By this action Paul is placing himself under the legal obligation to carry out his commitment to pay Onesimus' debt to Philemon. Paul knew the impact this would have on Philemon. Paul, a prisoner in Rome with little ability to gainfully earn money, is taking on the full financial obligation of Onesimus to repay Philemon, a wealthy free man in Colosse.

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Paul then challenged Philemon to consider what Paul had done for him ("you owe to me even your own self"). Paul references the fact that Philemon was brought to a saving faith in Christ by Paul, which means (in this context) that Philemon had an obligation to Paul for something greater than a financial debt – his eternal life. In comparison, the debt that Onesimus owed to Philemon was insignificant compared to the debt owed by Philemon to Paul – which was eternal life.

Philemon 20: Paul closes his thought to Philemon, his "brother", by telling him "to let me have joy from you". Philemon would bring joy to Paul by forgiving and receiving Onesimus.

For the third time in his letter to Philemon, Paul uses the term "heart", the deepest source of emotion, in issuing a command to Philemon, "refresh my heart". Philemon, the one who had refreshed the hearts of many saints in Colosse, could refresh the heart of Paul by forgiving and receiving Onesimus. What the Lord had already worked in Philemon's life could have become a reality for all to see in his restored relationship with Onesimus.

Philemon 21: Paul was confident that Philemon would positively respond to his appeals and requests....even obey them. Paul also believed that Philemon would do more than what Paul's appeals and requested asked for. Paul purposely gave Philemon freedom to decide what he could and would do as he initiated and restored his relationship with Onesimus.

Philemon 22-25: Paul concludes his letter to Philemon with some personal requests and greetings.

Paul requested a guest room for himself, as he was looking to be released from prison in Rome. This was an interesting request of Philemon because of its numerous impacts. It was a personal request that sent several messages; one, Philemon knew that one day he may be visited by Paul and would have to answer Paul personally on how

he responded to Paul's request to forgive and receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ; and two, it helped motivate Philemon to pray for Paul's release. This request was a strong indication of the closeness of Paul and Philemon's relationship.

Paul also requested Philemon's prayers for his release from prison.

Paul sent greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. These men are also mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:10-14).

Paul closes his letter to Philemon with a one-sentence benediction – "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit" – which is a typical benediction for Paul.

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