

NT Survey – Philemon
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
www.valleybible.net

Introduction

Philemon is the last of Paul's four letters labeled "The Prison Epistles" since they were written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome between AD 60-62. The other three were Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. All four make reference to his plight (Eph 3:1; Phil 1:7; Col 4:10; Philemon 1:9). There is little debate about Paul's authorship, since claiming Philemon a forgery is of no value to skeptics and early church sources unanimously placed it in the canon.

Philemon is a personal letter from Paul to a wealthy believer in Colossae concerning his runaway slave, Onesimus. Onesimus had stolen some money and ran away (v18). Along with thousands of other runaways, he made his way to Rome where he could hide among the throngs of people from all parts of the Empire. (*Speculation...*) One day, Onesimus "chanced" upon some people who were going to hear an unusual man, a prisoner chained to a member of the Praetorian Guard living under house arrest. This was the divine appointment that God had planned from eternity past. He heard the gospel, repented, surrendered to Christ as Lord and Saviour, and became a new creature in Christ (v10).

Paul grew to love Onesimus and value his help in the ministry at Rome (v11-13). Eventually, Onesimus told Paul his story. Paul just happened to know Onesimus' master, since he was a believer, and the church at Colossae met in his home (v2). In fact, he was probably saved under Paul's ministry at Ephesus (v19). This created a dilemma. Onesimus was a criminal, having broken Roman criminal law by running away from his lawful master and civil law by defrauding him as well. These offenses were punishable by scourging, mutilation, or even crucifixion under Roman law. Paul knew that this issue needed to be dealt with (v14).

So, Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon, offering to pay him back for his losses and urging him to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back as a brother in Christ (v15-17). For protection, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae with Tychicus (Col 4:7) who was carrying a letter for the church.

Slavery

Slavery was wide spread in the Roman Empire with one third to one half of its 120 million people in a slave or servant relationship. It was so prevalent that it became the normal way of life, especially in the major cities. It totally eclipsed paid labor, becoming the primary labor source in the Greco-Roman world and a vital part of its economy. Slavery was totally unrelated to race and the supply of slaves came from a number of sources:

1. People captured by the Roman army were sold.
2. Abandoned children were "rescued" and raised and sold by professional slave-owner/sellers.
3. Children born into slave families belonged to their parent's owners.
4. People were sometimes sold by the courts or sold themselves into slavery to settle debts.
5. Some actually bonded themselves to masters to get a specific job.

All these factors meant that being a slave could be very bad or very good.

The bad:

1. Slaves were not legally considered persons, but, as Aristotle put it, "human tools" to be owned and used much as animals were.
2. Since they were "property" rather than "people" they could be bought, sold, traded, exchanged, inherited, and seized for payment of debts.
3. Under Roman law, masters had the ultimate right of punishment, including the power of life and death, over their slaves. This meant abuse and brutality were common and death was frequent.
4. Run-away slaves were subject to arrest, torture, and death.

The good distinguished it from modern slavery:

1. Slaves were valuable property. A productive slave could bring a price that was equal to nine times a year's wage of a freeman laborer.
2. Slaves were employed in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, mining, entertainment, clerical, government, and household jobs. Many were trained in the trade of their master: teachers, librarians, musicians, artists, accountants, cooks, and even doctors or stewards who controlled their master's business and personal wealth. Family friendships often developed.
3. Many owners realized that contented and educated slaves were more valuable and productive so they had them educated, allowed them to marry and have families, meet in social groups, and even allowed some to have personal money and their own property. Since slaves had their food and housing supplied, they were often better off than free men who were uneducated, lived in poverty, paid exorbitant taxes, and had to serve in the military.
4. Slaves were often given, or were able to buy, freedom after a prescribed period of service and most were free upon the death of their masters.

Philemon was not the only slave holder in the church at Colossae (4:1) so this letter also gave guidelines for other Christian masters in relation to their slave-brothers. Paul did not dispute the legal rights of Philemon over Onesimus, but asked that he relate the principle of Christian brotherhood to the situation. The relationship between Christian slaves and masters must be controlled by their common relationship with Christ. Philemon was instructed to receive his runaway slave as a "beloved brother" (v16).

²⁶For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, **there is neither slave nor free man**, there is neither male nor female; **for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** Gal 3:26-28

Political Activism

Paul wrote about slaves and masters quite often (1 Cor 7; Gal 3; Eph 6; Col 3 and 4; 1 Tim 6) and he always accepted slavery as a reality in the Roman Empire. In fact, nowhere in the NT is slavery challenged. Early Christians never mounted an open attack against slavery or any other social evil.

"...had it done so, the resulting slave insurrection would have been brutally suppressed and the message of the gospel hopelessly confused with that of social reform." MacArthur Study Bible notes on Philemon

Instead, the church focused on the message of the gospel and its power to transform lives as opposed to trying to reform society.

Outline

- I. Greeting (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving and Prayer for Philemon (4-7)
- III. Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-21)
- IV. Final Request, Greetings and Benediction (22-25)

Summary

Greeting (1:1-3)

1:1-3 – Paul identifies himself as a “prisoner of Christ Jesus”. He referred to himself as “prisoner” in the other prison epistles (Eph 3:1; 4:1; and Col 4:10). However, he does it three times in this short book (v1, 9, and 23). It is true that Paul is in prison under house arrest, but beyond this he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus; a bond-servant of Christ. He is owned by Christ and is compelled out of love and because of Christ's lordship to obey his Master.

❖ Do I view myself as being owned by Christ; do I live accordingly?

Paul's co-sender is Timothy, someone whom Philemon would have known well also.

Paul is writing to Philemon's household and the church that met in their home.

1. Philemon – Paul and Timothy's beloved brother and fellow worker.
2. Apphia – Paul and Timothy's sister in the Lord. She is probably a family member of Philemon; most likely his wife. Perhaps mentioned here because she would have had the day-to-day responsibilities for the household slaves.
3. Archippus – Paul and Timothy's "fellow soldier". He is another family member of Philemon (perhaps a son or brother) and a leader of the Colossian church that met in Philemon's home.
¹⁷Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." Col 4:17
4. The church in your house – While a personal letter, it was written to the entire house church. The house church would have some of these characteristics: a gathering of saved people, worshipping together, being united, cared for by godly leadership, the Word of God central to life, and a heart to serve/minister to those inside and out.

❖ Is my home like that?

Thanksgiving and Prayer for Philemon (4-7)

1:4-7 – Philemon was probably a wealthy member of the Colossian church to be able to host the church in his house. He used God's resources to serve the body.

❖ Do I use God's resources to serve the body?

Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and he always mentioned Philemon. There is no flattery here on Paul's part to gain an advantage. Philemon was honoring to the Lord by living filled with the Spirit and glorifying Him by allowing the fruits of the Spirit to be shown in his life. Paul rejoiced when believers used their spiritual gifts and God's personal blessings to serve Christ's body.

❖ What do I pray for? Am I using my spiritual gifts to serve the body?

Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-21)

1:8-17 – Appeal – Paul has the authority, as an Apostle, to order Philemon to do what he knows is proper – to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother. He chooses instead to appeal to his well-known love. Love is what binds all involved in this situation together since they are all believers. Onesimus is now a believer having come to faith through Paul in Rome. Onesimus is repentant, transformed, and proven faithful (v8-10).

❖ What motivates me in my relationship with other believers?

Paul plays with words. "Onesimus, ("useful") ...who formerly was useless to you now is useful both to you and to me." (v11) In fact, Onesimus is now so useful to Paul in his prison ministry that sending him home is like "sending my very heart" (v12-13).

Paul did not want to force Philemon to do the right thing. Paul wanted him to do the right thing because Christ was working in him (v14).

❖ Why do I do the "right things"?

Paul knew that, legally, Philemon could have punished Onesimus. By law he could have him killed. This is a tough situation for Philemon. If he is easy on Onesimus, his other slaves might rebel or try to become "Christians" to receive special treatment. If he was too hard he would be a poor example of forgiveness in the church. Paul appeals to Philemon's faith in the providence of God: "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, ..." (v15-16).

❖ Do I see God's hand in the events occurring around me?

Paul believed that accepting Onesimus was the same as accepting him, a partner in Christ (v17).

1:18-20 – Offer – Restitution is an important part of repentance. Onesimus was now a believer, but he was still a thief and runaway slave and had brought damage and loss to Philemon. Paul would not, therefore, suggest that he ignore the crime and forget about the debt. He would, instead, offer to pay the debt himself. Philemon could not miss the picture of Christ paying the penalty for our sin, so we can have acceptance before the Father (v18-19).

Philemon was a slave to sin when Paul met him, and so, since Paul lead him to Jesus, he figuratively owes Paul his life (v19).

Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints (v7), now Paul asks him to refresh his own heart in Christ (v20). As Philemon forgives Onesimus, Paul will praise God for His work in changing hearts.

❖ Do I praise God for His work in other believers' lives?

1:21 – Confidence – Paul, knowing Philemon, is confident that he will be obedient to God and do "even more" than the minimum requirement Paul is suggesting in regards to forgiving Onesimus (v21).

❖ Am I zealous for forgiveness?

Forgiveness

The unconditional, gracious human act of not holding wrong acts against a person. Forgiveness is that act and attitude toward those who have wronged us which restores relationships and fellowship.

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.** Eph 4:31-32

¹²So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³bearing with one another, and **forgiving each other**, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Col 3:12-13

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus said* to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Matt 18:21-35 (v23-35 compares small debts against us with a lifetime of sin against God)

Love is the basis for forgiveness

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, **does not take into account a wrong suffered**, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Cor 13:4-7

⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because **love covers a multitude of sins.** 1 Pet 4:8

A person who forgives is a person who emulates godly character. Nothing so much demonstrates God's love as His forgiveness. A person who does not forgive is therefore a person lacking in godly character and without Christ-like love, no matter how orthodox his theology or how outwardly impeccable his morals appear to be. A Christian who will not relinquish a hateful, resentful attitude toward someone who has wronged him is a person who knows neither the true glory of his redeemed humanity nor the true glory of God's gracious divinity. An unforgiving Christian is a living contradiction of His new nature in Christ. It is central to the heart of God to forgive, and only the Christian who radiates forgiveness radiates true godliness. MacArthur's NT Commentary: Matthew 16-23

The Implied Picture of Believer-Believer Forgiveness in Philemon:

v8-10, 21 – The one who forgives **responds to an appeal** for forgiveness; either an individual, Scripture, or the Holy Spirit.

⁸Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper, ⁹yet 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—¹⁰I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

v11 – The one who forgives **changes the opinion of the offender**.

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

v12-13 – The one who forgives **receives the offender back**.

¹²I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

v14 – The one who forgives **does so willingly**.

¹⁴but 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.

v15-17 – The one who forgives **restores the offender**.

¹⁵For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶no 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. ¹⁷If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me.

v18-19 – The one who forgives **releases the claim/right of restitution**.

¹⁸But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹I, 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).

V20 – The one who forgives **is a blessing to many**.

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

V21 – The one who forgives **does so zealously**.

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

❖ Is forgiveness prominent in my life?

Final Request, Greetings and Benediction (22-25)

1:22-25 – Paul asked Philemon to get the guest room ready since he was planning to visit Colossae when he was released from prison (Phil 1:25-26). He concludes with greeting from his fellow workers in Rome and ends with a common benediction.

Homework

Read Hebrews.