

## Bible Study: Philemon

Author: Paul

Audience: Philemon

Date: ca. 61-63 AD

Location: Rome

Theme: Christian love brings reconciliation

Genre: epistle/prose

### Outline

Salutation and Blessing (1-3)

Paul's Commendation of Philemon (4-7)

Paul's Petition for Onesimus (8-17)

Paul's Pledge to Philemon (18-20)

Conclusion and Greetings (21-25)

The epistle to Philemon is a case study in the art of leadership, influence and persuasion. Observe how Paul relentlessly persuades Philemon to forgive & accept Onesimus. What would motivate Saul of Tarsus to be such a tenacious peacemaker (Matt 5:7, 9)?

### Observation

1:1 Paul recounts his appreciation for Philemon and their joint ministry (friendship).

1:2 The church met in Philemon's house; everyone will hear about this (reputation).

1:4 Paul recalls his continual gratitude and prayers for Philemon (friendship).

1:5 Paul commends Philemon for his love and faithfulness to the Lord & the saints.

1:6 Paul prays that Philemon will continue to share his faith effectively (reputation).

1:7 Philemon is a joy and comfort because he has refreshed the saints (reputation).

1:8 Paul could order Philemon to do the right thing (i.e., forgive a brother, Matt 6:12).

1:9 Paul appeals for sympathy: he is old and a suffering prisoner (friendship).

1:10 Onesimus has been born again because Paul converted him to Christ (1Cor 4:15).<sup>1</sup>

1:11 Paul uses a play on words; Onesimus is a Greek name that means "useful."

1:12 Paul reminds Philemon that he loves Onesimus very much (friendship).

1:13 Paul wanted to keep Onesimus as a comfort to him in prison (i.e., he has changed).

1:14 Paul sent Onesimus back because they were both breaking the law otherwise.

1:16 Paul suggests that this may have been providential (i.e., don't resist God's will).

1:17 Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of their relationship (friendship).

1:18 Paul pledges to cover any financial loss that Onesimus owes (friendship).

1:19 Paul writes the pledge in his own hand; he had been dictating to a secretary.

1:19 Philemon owed Paul an even greater debt; Paul had converted Philemon.

1:20 Paul asks his "brother" Philemon to do this favor for him (friendship).

1:21 Paul raises the bar: "I know that you will do MORE than I ask" (i.e., free him).

1:22 Paul hints that he will visit Philemon very soon (i.e., you can't avoid facing me).

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<sup>1</sup>Among the Jews of the Talmudic period (ca. A.D. 200-500), it was frequently said that "one who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born" (Yebamoth fol. 22a). Another passage says, "He who teaches the son of his neighbor the Torah, Scripture ascribes it to him as if he had begotten him" (Sanhedrin fol. 19b).

### Interpretation

What is the background of the epistle to Philemon?

- Paul wrote this letter and the epistle to the Colossians during the latter part of his first Roman imprisonment since he expected to be released in the near future (22).
- Philemon was a wealthy resident of Colosse and an active Christian who allowed the local congregation to meet in his home (2).
- Onesimus was Philemon's runaway slave (16) who evidently robbed his master (18) and fled to Rome, where he met Paul and became a Christian (10).
- Onesimus travelled back to Colosse with Tychicus bringing letters from Paul and greetings from fellow Christians (cf. Philemon 23-24, Col 4:7-16).
- Apphia may have been Philemon's wife (2); if true, she was also involved in deciding the fate of Onesimus because, according to the custom of the time, she had day-to-day responsibility for the slaves.<sup>2</sup>
- Archippus was a minister in Colosse (Col 4:17) who may also have been Philemon's son.
- After reading this, Philemon could legally beat Onesimus, brand him with hot irons, sell him, forgive him, or free him. What will he do? What would we do (Matt 18:21-35)?

What was slavery like in the first century?

Slavery was universally taken for granted in the first century A.D. Jewish slaves had certain privileges and were under legal protection. Greek slaves were used for industrial purposes and worked in the mines under terrible conditions. Roman slaves were generally used in houses or on farms. A slave could not be legally married or own property. Any children born to a female slave would become the property of her master.

Cruel punishments were inflicted upon slaves for mistakes and disobedience. Slaves were often beaten with sticks or whipped. Runaway slaves and thieves were branded on the forehead with a mark. Others were imprisoned. Although many died as a result of mistreatment, it was illegal to take the life of a slave without a court order.

The rights of a master over a slave were in no way affected by a slave's running away. It was the duty of civil authorities to aid in the recovery of slaves. Some citizens made it their business to capture and return runaway slaves for a profit. It was a serious criminal offense to harbor a runaway slave.

An owner could free a slave by a legal act called manumission. In Rome, manumission was often granted in an owner's will. In Greek states emancipated slaves became resident aliens, but in Rome they could be granted citizenship. This resulted in a great flow of slaves to Italy, especially in the last two centuries before Christ. Onesimus was undoubtedly aware that there were many freed slaves in the city who might be willing to offer him some assistance.<sup>3</sup>

### Application

An example to follow: Commending the good in others (4)

An example to follow: Seeking the welfare of others (10)

An example to follow: Dealing honestly with others (12)

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 11:458.

<sup>3</sup>*Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2001), 656.