

# Philemon

INTRODUCTION TO  
PHILEMON

**WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT?** A plea for forgiveness for a runaway slave who actually made something of his life.

**WHO WROTE IT?** The apostle Paul.

**WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?** About A.D. 60.

**WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT?** Philemon is another of Paul's letters from prison, written about the same time as Colossians.

**THE BREAKDOWN**

- 1:1-7: Paul gives thanks for Philemon
- 1:8-21: Paul begs Philemon to take Onesimus back
- 1:22-25: Personal notes

**KEY CONCEPTS**

- Favor; request
- Brother vs. slave

**SCORECARD**

- Paul: The writer
- Philemon: A leader in the Colossian church, and a slave owner
- Onesimus: A slave who had run away from Philemon

**READING TIME**

PM HOURS	:30	1:00	1:30	2:00	2:30
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**THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE**

- **TRUE VALUE.** This book shows an important man taking time for a nobody—a young guy who has seriously gotten into a jam in life. Yet he has changed his ways and become valuable, and the apostle is sensitive enough to go to bat for him.

**WHAT'S THE POINT OF Philemon?**

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Take time to help the guy who's messed up.

**BACKGROUND**

This letter addresses the personal concerns of two Christians, Philemon and Onesimus. Philemon lived in Colosse and was one of Paul's converts (Col 4:9). Onesimus, whose name means "useful," was a slave in Philemon's household. After stealing from his master, Onesimus escaped to Rome. Under Roman law, Philemon could have punished him by death if he was captured. At some point, Onesimus found Paul in Rome and became a believer.

**MESSAGE**

Paul, who refers to himself as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (verses 1, 9), is sending Onesimus back to the house-

**OUTLINE**

I. Greeting 1-3  
 II. A Prayer for Philemon 4-7  
 III. Advice about Onesimus 8-21  
 IV. Final Greetings 22-25

**TIME**

Paul wrote his Epistle to Philemon when he was under house arrest in Rome in A.D. 60 or 61.

**1:3-9** Before bringing up the problem of the runaway Onesimus, Paul took some time to establish his lines of communication with Philemon. The apostle showed an appreciation for Philemon and a real concern for his family. There are times when we are called upon to confront others about their sins or deal with some other touchy problem. As we face situations that require confrontation, we need to make sure we value the people involved and take the time to establish strong lines of communication. If we jump in too soon, they may feel we are just trying to hurt them. If we prove our love beforehand, however, they will be more likely to listen to what we have to say.

**1:14-17** Onesimus and Philemon each had a responsibility. Onesimus was responsible to do what he could to make restitution to Philemon; Philemon was responsible to accept the overtures of the repentant Onesimus. They had to let go of their old resentments. If we have wronged someone else, we need to accept responsibility for that and take steps toward making restitution. It is equally important, however, that we respond with forgiveness when others harm us. Bearing a grudge against someone else is destructive not only to the person we turn away; it also will fill us with unresolved bitterness, hindering our spiritual progress.

**1:18-21** With the phrase "Charge it to me," Paul was asking Philemon to reckon Onesimus's debt against Paul's account. Philemon was to welcome Onesimus back into his household as if Paul were the one returning. Paul intervened to help these brothers resolve the resentment and repair this broken relationship. This is a beautiful illustration of what God does for us through Jesus Christ. God reckons all our sins and failures to the account of Jesus Christ, who has paid the price through his death on the cross. Then God joyfully receives us into his family, just as if he were welcoming his own Son (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).



here are two things we seldom see nowadays—a personal handwritten note; and someone who says to us, “Put that on my bill.”

In this little letter, a man named Philemon received both.

This is one of the most personal stories in the Bible, and it provides us with Paul’s only piece of truly private correspondence in Scripture. Paul wrote it from prison, addressed to a wealthy man named Philemon who lived in the Turkish town of Colosse.

Philemon possessed bondservants, one of whom—Onesimus—had run away and fled to Rome. It’s likely he had robbed Philemon. There in the capital city of Rome, Onesimus crossed paths with the apostle Paul who led him to faith in Christ. The young man found new life, and Paul took this boy into his heart like a father to his son, mentoring and discipling him. But the day came for Onesimus to be sent back to Philemon with this slip of a letter, an appeal from Paul to Philemon regarding Onesimus. “Receive this young man as a brother,” said Paul, and “if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account” (Philemon 1:17-18).

Onesimus left a runaway slave; he returned a dear brother, and we’re left with a book that teaches us the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can’t claim to experience God’s love if we refuse to forgive others. Christian forgiveness knows no boundaries. Christ put our sins on His account that we might be both forgiven and forgiving.



**KEY THOUGHT:**

Being members of God’s family obligates us to attitudes of forgiveness, reconciliation, and mutual respect, one for another.



**KEY VERSES:**

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.”

Philemon 1:10-11



**KEY ACTION:**

Receive, respect, and refresh your brothers and sisters in Christ.



**KEY PRAYER:**

Lord, may the sharing of my faith become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing I have in Christ.

Someone you  
should know:

## Philemon

# A Bold Favor

**FORGIVENESS CAN COST A LOT.** It might entail financial loss. It might involve emotional distress. It might mean swallowing a good chunk of pride. And yet God calls his people to forgive, as a well-off church leader named Philemon discovered.

Philemon apparently lived in Colosse, a small town on the Lycus River about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Once an important trading center, by the first century Colosse had declined in importance and size due to the growth of two neighboring cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Philemon owned a home large enough to accommodate the Colossian church (Philemon 1:2) and also owned slaves, as did others in the congregation (Colossians 4:1). One of his slaves, Onesimus (whose name means "useful"), stole some items belonging to Philemon and ran away. Under Roman law, a runaway slave could be severely punished and even violently killed upon his recapture.

Philemon heard nothing about his runaway slave for some time . . . until he received a short, unexpected letter from the imprisoned apostle Paul. Not long before, Paul had led the imprisoned Philemon 1:19), and so Philemon probably felt delighted to hear from his spiritual father.

Yet Paul wasn't writing merely to say hello. He informed Philemon that he had come into contact with Onesimus while in prison and had helped the runaway slave make a commitment to Christ. Now he was sending Onesimus back to his master, no longer as a slave, but as a "beloved brother" (1:16).

Paul had only one tiny request: "Show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison. Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart" (1:10-12).

In other words, Paul was asking his friend to forgive Onesimus. Forgive him for running away. Forgive him for theft. Forgive him for disrupting the household.

The apostle wanted to tap the generosity and kindness of Philemon, even asking him to "welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me." Then, to show the seriousness of his request, Paul added, "if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me" (1:17-18).

Philemon had a choice to make. He had every right under Roman law to beat or even execute his returned slave. He could take what Onesimus owed him out of the slave's hide. But Paul had asked him (not commanded him, though he pointed out in verse 8 that he *could* have) to forbear.

Forgiveness can be costly. It certainly was for Philemon. But when God gets involved, the paycheck far exceeds the expense.

**THE POINT:** Forgiveness may seem expensive, but it pays back more than it costs.

## BASIC SURVEY

### PHILEMON

**AUTHOR:** The apostle Paul (1:1).

**DATE:** Probably around AD 63, when Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

#### IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

Paul begs mercy for a runaway slave converted to Christianity.

#### DETAILS, PLEASE

Philemon is a "fellow worker" (1:1 NIV) of Paul, a man who has "refreshed" (1:7) other Christians with his love and generosity. But the apostle writes with a deeper request—that Philemon forgive and take back a runaway slave, who apparently accepted Christ under Paul's teachings: "my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds" (1:10 KJV). "If then you count me as a partner," Paul wrote to Philemon, "receive him as you would me" (1:17 NKJV).

#### QUOTABLE

> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus (1:4–5 NIV).

> Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say (1:21 NASB).

#### UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

With only one chapter and twenty-five verses, Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters in the Bible.

#### SO WHAT?

Christians are called to forgive, and here's a practical example to consider: With God's help, will you let go of your grudges?

#### READ PHILEMON 1 AND PSALM 59.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 256. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 256. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 254. →

## CLOSER LOOK

## SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT



Paul encouraged his friend Philemon to free the slave who had run away and welcome him as a fellow Christian.

**NTL?.** Does this mean that slavery was a God-ordained institution?

No. These statements were made within a specific cultural context. Also, slavery in the Roman Empire, in Paul's day, was not as harsh as what existed in America. Emperor Claudius (before AD 54) ruled that a master who killed a sick or worn-out slave could be charged with murder. When Paul wrote to the Colossians in AD 60, Emperor Nero had just granted slaves the right to lodge complaints against their masters in a court of law for unfair or cruel treatment.

This is not to say that slavery was a desirable state even then. It wasn't! But Paul couldn't openly call for empire-wide emancipation without being arrested and executed for stirring up a slave revolt. Nevertheless, he advised, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you *can* gain your freedom, *do so*" (1 Corinthians 7:21 **NIV**, emphasis added).

And in a letter to his wealthy Roman friend, Philemon, Paul not only asked him to forgive a runaway slave named Onesimus, but requested that he set him free: "He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother. . . . Welcome him as you would welcome me" (Philemon 1:16–17 **NLT**).

READ NEHEMIAH 5 AND JEREMIAH 34.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 256.



## HIDDEN TREASURE

## A CONSIDERATE FRIEND

Philemon was a wealthy man of Colosse, and Paul had apparently led him to the Lord, since Philemon owed him his very soul (Philemon 1:19). When Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus ended up in Rome, and Paul led him to faith in Christ also, Onesimus proved so helpful that Paul wished he could simply keep him. But instead he asked Philemon to allow him to stay. As Paul wrote, "I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you." Paul explained, "I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced" (Philemon 1:8–9, 14 **NLT**).

READ ISAIAH 25 AND 28:9–29.

## HIDDEN TREASURE

## PRAYING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Paul wrote Philemon, "Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers" (Philemon 1:22 **NIV**). Philemon, and undoubtedly many others, had been praying unceasingly for Paul to be released from prison—and he eventually *was!* Paul realized the value of prayer and often requested others to pray for him. Years earlier he had written to the Thessalonians, asking them to pray that God would bless his ministry *and* protect him from his enemies: "Brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people" (2 Thessalonians 3:1–2 **NIV**).

READ ISAIAH 32–33.

**The Rest of This Story • 21**

The Bible does not say what happened when Onesimus returned to Philemon, but it is believed that Philemon read Paul's letter, granted the former slave his freedom, and sent Onesimus back to partner with Paul in the work of the gospel. The letter itself hints at Paul's hope for this outcome (21). But secular history suggests it as well: 50 years after the letter to Philemon was written, Ignatius drafted a letter to the church in Ephesus in which he mentioned a bishop named Onesimus who was "profitable in Christ"—the same word Paul used (11). Apparently, by the grace of God, Onesimus the runaway slave became the bishop of Ephesus.

# Philemon

BOOK INTRODUCTION

The Book of Philemon vividly reminds us that the church has always advanced through the work and dedication of ordinary people. In the early church, there were a few notable figures like Paul, Peter, and James. But God's Word records lesser-known names like Philemon and Onesimus so we might never forget that He has a mission for each of us—whether we are familiar to many or known only within our local congregations.

When Paul wrote this letter (c. AD 60), he was serving a two-year house arrest in Rome, which meant he was monitored 24 hours a day by a personal, live-in prison guard (Acts 28:16). Although Paul was not permitted to come and go as he pleased, he did have one important freedom: he could receive visitors—from Jewish leaders (Acts 28:17–28) to coworkers and supporters (Col. 4:7–14).

One such visitor was a slave named Onesimus, who belonged to an affluent Christian leader in the Colossian church named Philemon (16). It is possible that Onesimus fled from and even stole from his master, Philemon. It is also possible that slave and master had some kind of dispute. In such instances, under Roman law a slave was permitted to seek out a third party to help settle the dispute. Either way, Onesimus ended up with Paul in Rome and became a Christian. And Paul persuaded the runaway to return to his master so that Onesimus might seek forgiveness and that Philemon might grant it.

Sending Onesimus back to Colossae was costly for Paul; in a practical sense, Paul needed Onesimus much more than Philemon did, because the runaway slave had become a real help to him in the spread of the faith. But Paul was concerned with more than his own personal comfort and welfare. He knew that seeing the two men reunited as brothers in Christ would have a far greater impact on the church in Colossae—and the reputation of the gospel—than almost anything else could. That reunion would be a display of humility, love, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation, and thanksgiving. It would be a living illustration of the divine drama of redemption—and the love that Christ extends to us all.

## WHAT IT SAYS | *A Picture of the Gospel*

Paul's letter to Philemon is short—25 total verses in our Bible—335 words in the original Greek. But in its contents we see that Paul thought highly of Philemon (1), who hosted a house church in Colossae and must have been a person of means.

## PHILEMON

Paul follows a clear pattern in this private letter. First, he establishes rapport with Philemon (4–7), who was apparently a beloved friend and Christian brother. Then he appeals to reason and compassion in order to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus back (8–16). Finally, he makes his request: Philemon should receive the new Onesimus while forgiving the actions of the old one (17–22).

Philemon would have had no advance warning that Onesimus was arriving, accompanied by Tychicus, Paul's messenger and letter carrier. The letter needed to defuse the emotion of the moment and help reconcile people of drastically different social classes (master and slave). Ultimately, Paul also hoped Philemon would release Onesimus so that he could serve alongside Paul during his confinement.

## WHAT IT MEANS | *Reconciliation as a Priority*

The themes of Paul's letter give us a picture of the gospel.

- **Forgiveness and Reconciliation:** Other words from Paul—"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32)—are echoed in this letter as the apostle asks Philemon to extend his love for "all the saints" (5) to a new saint, Onesimus (4–7, 17). In Christ, all barriers and social distinctions are set aside. Christian love and forgiveness transcend all human distinctions (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).
- **Transformation:** The heart of Paul's message is that "in Christ, [Onesimus] is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The power of the gospel had transformed this slave. Philemon would be welcoming home a changed Onesimus (10, 11).
- **Sacrifice:** Reconciliation and forgiveness come with a price. Paul set an example of sacrifice for Philemon by giving up Onesimus' service to him and also offering to pay for the slave's former misdeeds. Paul uses the occasion to apply the heart of the gospel message—Christ's sacrifice—to this situation (12, 13, 18).

## WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU | *Set Free by Forgiveness*

The NT emphasizes spiritual change—change from the inside out. The Book of Philemon simultaneously illustrates this truth and offers a rich analogy of the lengths God will go to set any captive free, especially in our slavery to sin. We are all running from God. We have a debt we cannot repay on our own—a debt to death, not to dollars. But God, in His infinite grace, sent His Son Jesus to be our Savior, to pay all we owe, and to set us free.

Now we must pass along that grace to others—a point Paul made to his friend Philemon that still speaks across the channels of history: "If our heavenly Father could forgive this brother in the Lord who has wronged you, shouldn't you forgive him as well? And if God has forgiven you, shouldn't you extend that same forgiveness to others?"

We cannot claim to have experienced God's love and forgiveness if we refuse to forgive others. Christian forgiveness knows no boundaries. It is available to all!

# Philemon

“If someone ever said to you, ‘I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I want you to think through your decision and hopefully you will do the right thing’? No doubt a teacher, parent, friend, or relative has posed this dilemma to you in some form or another. Sometimes the person is hoping you admit to some wrongdoing or hoping you won’t follow the crowd and make a poor decision. Regardless of the situation, it most likely leaves you seriously considering your options—weighing what best to do.

Philemon, a rich slave owner, found himself in exactly this position after receiving the Apostle Paul’s letter.

As do many of Paul’s letters, he began and ended with greetings to certain individuals and encouragement to continue in the faith, as Paul himself was bringing their needs before the Lord in prayer. The apostle was under house arrest in Rome and wrote to Philemon about Onesimus.

From what we know of the letter’s background, Onesimus was one of Philemon’s slaves. Slavery was not uncommon in the Roman Empire. Onesimus ran away from Philemon, which basically labeled him as a criminal; runaway slaves could be captured and killed. However, Onesimus had somehow gotten to know Paul and Paul had led him to Christ. Paul wanted Onesimus to go back to Philemon because it was the right thing to do, but he wanted to let his friend Philemon know ahead of time that Onesimus was coming back “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother” (v. 16). Philemon needed to see him not as someone to be punished but as a new brother in Christ. Instead of ordering Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother, however, Paul appealed to his faith, “I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I fathered him while I was in chains” (vv. 9-10).

Paul could easily have ordered Philemon to do what is right. After all, he had the authority as an apostle. But he didn’t. Why? Because Paul

understood that true spiritual maturity comes not so much from just following orders but from a heart changed to put another’s needs in front of your own.

Even though Philemon is a short book, its message has far-reaching consequences. When we have to choose between what’s right and what’s convenient, these are the times in which we learn a lot about ourselves, our beliefs, and how eager we are to do what is right. Through Christ, we have been offered reconciliation, not only with Him but also with those around us. The choice won’t always be easy, just as it wasn’t for Philemon.

But we have some resources available, which Paul mentions in the third and last verses of Philemon—the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 25).

**Author:** Paul (Saul of Tarsus)

**Date:** Written around A.D. 60 while imprisoned in Rome

**What in the world is going on?**

A.D. 26–30 Years of Jesus’ ministry

A.D. 33 Saul of Tarsus converts and is later known as Paul

A.D. 46 Greek biographer Plutarch is born

A.D. 47–48 Paul and Barnabas visit Galatia during their first missionary journey

ca. A.D. 49–52

Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia and visits there for the first time during his second missionary journey; Timothy travels with Paul and Silas

ca. A.D. 53–57 Epaphras establishes the church in Colossae

A.D. 54–68 Nero rules the Roman Empire

A.D. 57 Paul writes the letter to the Romans from Corinth on his third missionary journey

A.D. 60 Paul defends himself before the Roman proconsul, Festus, and King Agrippa

A.D. 60 Paul is shipwrecked on the island of Malta en route to Rome

A.D. 60 Paul writes the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon from prison in Rome

ca. A.D. 60–64 Paul is free from Roman prison and writes letters to Timothy and Titus

A.D. 61

Suetonius Paulinus, the governor appointed by Rome, invades the island of Anglesey in a campaign against the Druids

ca. A.D. 62 Roman author Pliny the Younger is born



## What Is the Core of the Biblical Worldview?

Barbara Taylor

**W**ith all the doctrinal disagreements between people who name themselves Christians and with all the shifts in attitudes and changes various churches have made through history, is it possible to identify a single, core biblical worldview that unites all Christians?

This question is pressing because too often Christians expend a lot of effort disputing minor points of doctrine. It's all the more pressing because, in the marketplace of ideas in which worldviews, religions, and philosophies vie for public approval, many Christians don't have the foggiest notion what distinguishes the Christian faith from the alternatives.

Let's first consider what the core *isn't*. It isn't church tradition. Church traditions, whether represented by the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic church, Protestants of all stripes, the Anglican Communion, or the Pentecostal churches and their offshoots are not the core; they are only interpretations of the core. Pious opinions which are attempts by church communities to establish cultural expressions of Christian faith are not the core; they are only interpretations of the core, an attempt to live Christlike in a lost world. Private opinions on non-essential issues or issues about which the Bible is silent are not the core, though some people mistakenly take them to be so. These are ways of being Christian, but they do not define the core Christian worldview.

So what *is* the core? What have Christians through the ages believed and taught as most important? To begin with, the core of the biblical worldview emphasizes major things like God as sole Creator of heaven and earth; God as holy; God as One who communicates His existence and character; and people as made in God's image for a relationship with Him (Gn 1:26-27). The basic framework is summarized well in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Both affirm Jesus Christ as God's Son and Savior; His death on the cross for our sins; His literal resurrection from the dead; the Holy Spirit as God; and the urgency of salvation.

The core of the biblical worldview also includes acceptance of the Bible as God's authoritative revelation. We need to remember, however, that not everything in the Bible is of equal weight or importance; some things are central and abide through the centuries (like the moral principles of the Ten Commandments); others are bound to time and culture (like the OT's sacrificial system).

Reciting creeds or having correct knowledge about God is important but it's not the ultimate thing. One core aspect of really having the biblical worldview is to have a genuine experience of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The core biblical worldview has never been about arid philosophical knowledge; it's always been about knowing God, following Christ, and being attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. It's always been about living the truth in your daily lifestyle not just knowing it as a set of data in your head. In fact, the Bible teaches that unless you're doing the truth, you don't really know the truth. As the Apostle John wrote to his fellow believer Gaius, "I was very glad when some brothers came and testified to your faithfulness to the truth—how you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3Jn 3-4). Learning to do the truth—to walk in the truth—is a daily process, and that puts all of us in a constant learning mode rather than a having-it-all-figured-out mode.

## Does the Bible Endorse Slavery?

John Mark Reynolds

**T**wo common historic types of slavery are slavery based on economy and slavery based on race. The OT acknowledged the existence of economic slavery in ancient times and attempted to regulate it, making it more humane. The NT undermines the viability of all slavery by calling for slaves to be treated as "brothers," but does not call for immediate abolition. Indeed, when Paul sent the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon, he wrote that Onesimus (who had become a Christian) was returning "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother" (Phm 16). This essay offers several explanations for why there was no call for immediate abolition of slavery.

**Priority of the Soul** Our fallen world is full of social evils and new ones are invented every day. Scripture provides principles that, when applied to specific social injustices, can foster liberty and justice over time. The Bible attacks slavery and other social injustices only indirectly, because its main focus is not human culture, but the relationship between God and humankind. Healing for the dying soul is prioritized over overturning corrupt social systems.

**Principles for Change** Since God is most interested in changed hearts and eternal salvation, the Bible does not consist of rules regulating every aspect of social life. Instead, God forbids some harmful behaviors and begins the long process of revealing His nature and will to free beings. The simple lesson of monotheism is difficult enough for ancient peoples to understand. Once embraced, monotheism undermines slavery, because it demands allegiance to God and the divine will, placing all individuals on equal footing before God. All forms of slavery are incompatible with this truth. The Bible treats the slave as a human being capable of a relationship with God. While the OT demanded that slaves be treated humanely, the Apostle Paul went farther and asked Philemon to treat his slave as a brother. This ethic ensured that slavery could not forever survive amongst biblically consistent Christians.

**Pace of Change** Slavery in the ancient world was based on economic and military factors, not skin color. Defeated soldiers and bankrupt citizens often became slaves. Civilization and the hope of progress depended on highly structured, rigid social hierarchies. Greeks and Romans lacked the moral training, technological development, and economic sophistication to handle a fully free civilization. Mining, agriculture, construction, and many other basic activities depended on the labor force provided by slavery. Economic slavery is evil, but immediate abolition could have been a worse evil, possibly leading to violence, starvation, and total societal collapse. Overnight revolutionary change in human institutions often produces more violence than lasting peace. God understands such things. He is a good educator and He teaches His lessons as quickly as is feasible.

**Racial Equality** Racial slavery finds no justification in Scripture and is much worse than economic slavery. Race-based slavery calls into question the basic worth of people due to their skin color. Since this is plainly unbiblical, there was a much stronger argument for immediate abolition of race-based slavery, regardless of the social cost. Slavery in the United States occurred in an era when Christian principles were widespread, making slavery an obvious affront to moral justice. Slavery was not necessary for sustaining nineteenth century social order. Indeed, race-based slavery undermined the health of the nation.

# PHILEMON

- A. GREETINGS (1–3)
- B. PAUL COMMENDS PHILEMON (4–7)
- C. PAUL REQUESTS CONSIDERATION FOR ONESIMUS (8–21)
- D. CONCLUDING REMARKS (22–25)

## THE BIG PICTURE

There were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire; Onesimus was one of them. A kind Christian leader named Philemon, who happened to be one of the many people Paul had led to Christ, owned Onesimus. It appears that, out of desperation, Onesimus stole from his master and ran away. But as so often happens, Onesimus's attempt to run from his wrongdoing only added to his problem. According to the law, a runaway slave could be branded on the forehead or even executed.

Onesimus hid in Rome, and while there he met Paul. Through the apostle's influence, Onesimus came to believe in Jesus Christ. Paul, himself a prisoner at the time, wrote to his friend Philemon to tell him of Onesimus's conversion. The apostle begged Philemon to forgive Onesimus and welcome him home "as a dear brother" (Philemon 16). We do not know the final outcome of the story, but it seems likely that Philemon responded positively to Paul's suggestion to forgive Onesimus.

We have all been slaves at one time or another, although we may not have thought of it in those terms. Some of us have been slaves to our own sinful desires, to a false image we have created, to a set of human rules and regulations, to a job or possessions or even to the injuries of the past. Slavery of any kind diminishes our humanity, driving us to behave in ways that God never intended. God is the only one who can truly free us from slavery.

Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that God always loves us. God cares for us, just as he cared for Onesimus. God can step into the middle of our unmanageable lives and offer us real hope for the future. As long as we see the truth of our condition, surrender our lives to God and confess our sins, we can count on God to lead us to lives of true freedom.

## SPIRITUAL RENEWAL THEMES

### GOD CARES FOR THE OUTCAST

In Roman society a slave possessed no personal value. Onesimus was no different from any other slave. He had little worth apart from what he was able to do for his master. But in God's eyes Onesimus was highly valuable because no one is ever worthless to God. God's values are different from ours. He cares deeply about all people, regardless of their status in society. And God calls us to himself, offering us lives of spiritual renewal and hope.

## THE NECESSITY OF FORGIVENESS

According to the laws of the Roman Empire, Onesimus deserved death for what he had done. But God forgave him, and Paul asked Philemon to do the same. The forgiveness granted by God and by others truly releases us. We can rejoice that when we surrender our lives to God, from whom we have run away into sin, he forgives us and transforms our lives, even though we deserve death for our sinfulness. Then God helps us to make restitution to the people we have harmed, paving the way for our forgiveness and restoration with them as well.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF RESTITUTION

Onesimus had been reconciled to God; he had experienced God's forgiveness in his life. But although God had forgiven him, Onesimus was not exempt from the consequences of his earlier actions. He still had to return to Philemon to make restitution for his wrongs. Our actions can bring painful consequences; they can hurt other people. Even after we have been reconciled to God, we still need to accept responsibility for our previous actions and make restitution with those we have wronged. As hard as this may be, we can be sure that God is with us in the process. Onesimus returned to his master bearing this letter from Paul. And though there is no record of the outcome of Onesimus's return, it is unlikely that this letter would have survived had Philemon not taken Paul's advice and forgiven Onesimus.

## Essential Facts

### PURPOSE:

To convince Philemon, a Christian and a slave owner, to forgive a slave for running away.

### AUTHOR:

The apostle Paul.

### AUDIENCE:

Philemon, a believer in the early church.

### DATE WRITTEN:

About AD 60, during Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

### SETTING:

Slavery was common in the Roman Empire, even among new believers. Paul did not speak directly against slavery, but he did take a radical step by calling the slave Onesimus "a dear brother" (Philemon 16).

### KEYVERSES:

"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me" (10–11).

### KEY PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS:

Paul with Onesimus and Philemon.

### 1 prisoner

(*Gr. desmios*) (Matt. 27:15; Acts 28:16; Heb. 13:3)

G1198: This term refers to one who is bound as a captive or prisoner. It is related to words meaning "to bind," "bonds, fetters, chains," and "imprisonment." Several times it is used of Paul, who describes himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus and a prisoner in the Lord (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; Philm. 1, 9). During one of Paul's imprisonments, other prisoners heard him (and Silas) praying and singing hymns to God at midnight (Acts 16:25–27).



# How to Seek Reconciliation

Read: Philemon 8-21 | Habit: Faithfulness

**P**aul's letter to Philemon is unusual in that it is not a letter addressed to an entire congregation to correct a doctrinal issue or rectify a church crisis. It is an attempt to restore the relationship between two believers:

a slaveowner (Philemon) and his runaway slave (Onesimus), who might have stolen from his master but had since become a believer.

The bulk of the letter is Paul's notice that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon to reconcile their situation. Paul's message is that restoration between fellow believers is more important than what divides us.

As Christians we can, to some degree, reestablish friendly relations and be reconciled with non-believers. But the trust and fullest reconciliation between people is only possible after they have first been reconciled to God through Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Here are a few recommendations for seeking reconciliation with a fellow Christian:

- ▶ **Care more about the reconciliation than the hurt**—Too often we confuse wanting reconciliation with wanting the other person to admit they've wronged us. When we seek true reconciliation, we let go of old hurts and grievances so we can live in peace with one another (see Ro 12:18).
- ▶ **Have another believer serve as a mediator**—When siblings fight they often need a parent or other relative to mediate the dispute. The same is often true for siblings in the church family. Enlisting a mediator helps broach the topic of reconciliation and reminds us that our ruptured relationships affect other brothers and sisters in Christ. In this case, Paul acted as a mediator between Philemon and Onesimus.
- ▶ **Seek forgiveness first**—Without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation. Forgiveness is therefore not only a necessary step, but it is also the first and most essential step in the process of restoration and peace.
- ▶ **Accept what is offered**—Immediate reconciliation isn't always possible. Our words and actions might have damaged the relationship to the point where trust is difficult to reestablish. Be patient. Accept small measures that restore unity so that in time full reconciliation might become possible.

**PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY:** We have a duty to reconcile with fellow believers so that there will be no ruptures in the body of Christ.

The truest and fullest reconciliation between people is only possible after they have first been reconciled to God through Jesus.

## THE EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO PHILEMON

**DOES CHRISTIAN BROTHERLY LOVE REALLY work, even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty? Will it work, for example, between a prominent slave owner and one of his runaway slaves? Paul has no doubt! He writes a "postcard" to Philemon, his beloved brother and fellow worker, on behalf of Onesimus—a deserter, thief, and formerly worthless slave, but now Philemon's brother in Christ. With much tact and tenderness, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back with the same gentleness with which he would receive Paul himself. Any debt Onesimus owes, Paul promises to make good. Knowing Philemon, Paul is confident that brotherly love and forgiveness will carry the day.**

Since this letter is addressed to Philemon in verse 1, it becomes known as *Pros Philemona*, "To Philemon." Like First and Second Timothy and Titus, it is addressed to an individual, but unlike the Pastoral Epistles, Philemon is also addressed to a family and a church (v. 2).

### WATCH WORD

▶ **prisoner** (one who is bound as a captive)—1 (also 9)

### Tough Questions Why didn't Paul confront the evils of slavery in this letter? • 15, 16

For contemporary readers, Paul's letter to Philemon raises questions about the issue of Christians and slavery in the first century. By sending Onesimus back into bondage, wasn't Paul implicitly supporting the institution of slavery? Why didn't Paul keep Onesimus and seek to protect him from the consequences he might suffer upon his return to Philemon?

1. Paul's main goal was not to overturn the Roman institution of slavery but to see individual hearts changed by the gospel of Christ. Still, he never considered brutally against a slave acceptable. Neither did he ignore the subject of slavery. Rather, he radically challenged people's attitudes toward others, admonishing masters and slaves to serve one another with love and respect (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1). He also diligently declared the truth of the gospel for all people—that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free (Gal. 3:28)—knowing that this is the reality that truly sets people free (John 8:32).
2. In this particular situation, Paul knew the heart of Philemon—he could be trusted to do what was right. Paul also knew what was necessary for Onesimus, both legally (as a slave who could only be declared free by his master) and spiritually (as a new Christian). Onesimus needed to return to his owner and make things right, not just because the law demanded it but because Christ had introduced His love into the heart of both men. Paul sent Onesimus back so that he might truly be set free.
3. An institution like slavery that was such an integral part of the culture could not be overturned by the rebellion of a few. With Christianity still in its early stages, Paul could not hope to abolish slavery, but he could declare the gospel's countercultural message of love and forgiveness to all who would listen and urge fellow believers to do as God commanded. Little by little, as Christianity penetrated every strata of society and the love of Christ penetrated the hearts of individuals through the ages, the bonds of slavery were torn apart within entire societies and people were set free as God intended.

# KEY PASSAGE

**“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus” (verses 4–5).**

# PHILEMON

## In the Word

This book revolves primarily around a man named Onesimus, who appears to have been a slave owned by Philemon but had recently become converted by Paul. In this letter, Paul explained the change and asked Philemon to accept Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a brother in the Lord.

## Bondage to FREEDOM

Paul wrote the letter to Philemon while he was chained in a Roman prison, where he had recently prayed with Onesimus the slave to receive Christ and be free from sin.

### GREETINGS!

Paul wrote this letter not only to Philemon but also in the church that met in his home and to two other believers, Apphia and Archippus.

## DID YOU KNOW?

► This letter is the shortest written by Paul, containing only 25 verses.

## BY THE NUMBERS

1 CHAPTER  
25 VERSES  
480 WORDS

# PHILEMON

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker — <sup>2</sup>also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier — and to the church that meets in your home:

<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you<sup>a</sup> from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Thanksgiving and Prayer

<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.

### Paul’s Plea for Onesimus

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup>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 — <sup>10</sup>that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, <sup>b</sup>who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him — who is my very

heart — back to you. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever — <sup>16</sup>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.

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

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

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

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

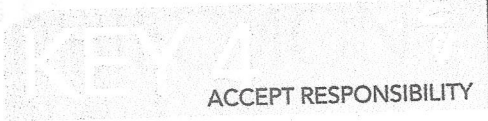
LIFE LESSONS: Forgive as God has forgiven you (verses 17–19).

LIFE LESSONS: Loving and serving others influences lives (verse 7).

<sup>a</sup> <sup>3</sup> The Greek is plural; also in verses 22 and 25; elsewhere in this letter “you” is singular.

<sup>b</sup> <sup>10</sup> *Onesimus* means *useful*.

PHILEMON 1



Paying Our Debts

Philemon 13-16

Sometimes taking responsibility for our lives means completing unfinished business. Some of us may have left a trail of broken relationships—things we need to address before moving on with our spiritual renewal. Others may be burdened by debts that distract us from spiritual pursuits. Tying up loose ends is something we must do before we can move forward toward new opportunities and spiritual growth.

A new life will never excuse us from our past obligations. While the apostle Paul was in prison, he led a runaway slave named Onesimus to Christ and a new life. But then Paul sent him back to his master even though Onesimus faced a possible death penalty for his offense. Since his previous master was a Christian brother and a friend of Paul's, Paul hoped that Onesimus would be forgiven.

Onesimus carried a letter to his master written by Paul, which read, "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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent . . . Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother . . . Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me" (Philemon 13-18). Paul recognized that even though Onesimus was now a Christian and forgiven of his sins, he needed to address the wrongs he had committed in his past.

Before we can move ahead, we must face the unfinished business of the past. This may include facing up to our cowardly behavior, our crooked schemes, or our quick-fix solutions to our problems. While we can be certain that God will meet us where we are—just as he met Onesimus—he won't allow us to move forward until we have taken full responsibility for the sins that brought us to our present circumstances. Once we accept full ownership of our past, God will guide us to confront our fears and tie up our loose ends. But he will do it his way, not ours.

Turn to Jude.