

Philemon: Care for the Converted & Returning Slave, Onesimus

Apostle Paul's Contributions

- Of the 27 books/letters in the New Testament, Paul is believed to have written 14.
- Most of Paul's contributions are letters to churches in response to inquiries from them or regarding issues in those churches that were brought to his attention. We don't have the initial inquiries that triggered his responses.
- Philemon is the ONLY proactive letter we have.
- Paul's other letters were written to be circulated; this one is private and personal.
- Paul is frequently mistakenly accused of supporting slavery and the subordination of women (Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5).

Slavery

- Common at this time
- Captives of war
- Adults sold children
- Adults voluntarily enslaved themselves for a period of time, frequently to settle debts
- Master could do ANYTHING to a runaway slave, including death

Salutation

Read the opening – **Philemon 1:1-3**.

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our
fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

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

Who are the main characters?

Paul – the Apostle and author of this private letter

Philemon – slave master, living in Colossae

Apphia – Philemon's wife

Archippus – Philemon's son

Later: Onesimus (“useful” or “profitable”) – a runaway slave

Philemon was one of Paul's converts. Paul calls him “brother” because his faith and love in the community has strengthened it. Read **Philemon 1:4-7**.

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

Letter Contents

Paul could order Philemon, but prefers to persuade him. He wants Philemon to do the right thing for the right reason.

- Onesimus proved his worth by ministering to Paul while Paul was in prison, thus this letter was probably written from Rome (1180 miles away).
- V.12 shows Paul was struggling with sending Onesimus back because he had become such a valuable friend.
- Receive him back as more than a slave, as a dear brother

Paul does not presume on Philemon's generosity; rather he asks Philemon to treat Onesimus as he would Paul, himself, including any debts (since Philemon probably stole a large sum of money, such that he traveled from Colossae to Rome and then lived there a while until he met Paul).

Paul closes with a hope to visit Philemon, even though he is currently in prison.

Summary:

Paul does not challenge the institution of slavery, but he does challenge any structure where one person is greater than another. This includes the Jewish family hierarchy where women were considered second-class citizens, even sometimes "property," despite the many people who think Paul was misogynous. Paul preached that all are equal in Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. – Galatians 3:38

In v.19 Paul reminds Philemon that he owes his own self to Paul (referring to his new Christian life), thus Paul is only asking Philemon to fulfill his Christian duty of love towards another person.

Philemon must have been persuaded by Paul's letter to receive Onesimus warmly because he saved Paul's letter for posterity.

"Bishop Lance Webb, author of an inspiring historical novel, *Onesimus*, based on twenty years of research, believes with many others that Onesimus became bishop of the church in Ephesus, serving there at the close of the first and beginning of the second century. This may well have been the reason for the letter to Philemon having been included in the collection of Paul's writings. At the end of his book, Webb quotes from (the) writing of Ignatius to the church at Ephesus, describing the modest but strong character of Onesimus:

'I received the welcome of your congregation in the presence of
Onesimus, your bishop in this world, a man whose love is beyond words.'

My prayer is that you should love him in the spirit of Jesus Christ and all be like him. Blessed is He who let you have such a bishop.’

‘Webb’s closing paragraph states:

‘Thus, one who once was determined to be his own master instead became a slave of Christ perhaps that he might learn to govern with compassion the people of God under his charge in Ephesus. The words of Paul and John would remain his anthem...’ Stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has set you free... And above all, love one another, for God is love.’ ”¹

“Paul’s benediction was his trademark – sometimes appearing at the beginning as well as the end of his epistles: *‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.’* It is the trademark and signature of all who belong to Jesus Christ.”²

References:

1. Asbury Bible Commentary (on line), <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search>
2. Dunnam, Maxie D., Mastering The New Testament: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon, Lloyd J. Ogilvie, General Editor, Word, Inc., 1982.
3. Harper Study Bible, Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985.
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6. Free on-line commentaries:
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¹ Dunham, p. 406.

² Dunham, p. 417.