

# PHILEMON

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke  
John  
Acts  
Romans  
1 Corinthians  
2 Corinthians

Galatians  
Ephesians  
Philippians  
Colossians  
1 Thessalonians  
2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy  
2 Timothy  
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**Philemon**  
Hebrews  
James  
1 Peter

2 Peter  
1 John  
2 John  
3 John  
Jude  
Revelation

## OUTLINE

**Key theme:** Christian forgiveness

**Key verses:** Philemon 15–16

### APPRECIATION (1–7) (“I thank my God”)

- A. Paul’s love—1–3
- B. Paul’s thanksgiving—4–5, 7
- C. Paul’s prayer—6

### APPEAL (8–16) (“I beseech thee”)

- A. Philemon’s character—8–9
- B. Onesimus’s conversion—10–14
- C. God’s providence—15–16

### ASSURANCE (17–25) (“I will repay”)

- A. Paul’s partnership—17–19
- B. Paul’s confidence—20–22
- C. Paul’s greetings—23–25

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A Tale of Two Cities

## CHAPTER ONE

### Philemon 1-25

### A TALE OF TWO CITIES

**P**aul was a prisoner in Rome, his friend Philemon was in Colosse, and the human link between them was a runaway slave named Onesimus. The details are not clear, but it appears that Onesimus robbed his master and then fled to Rome, hoping to be swallowed up in the crowded metropolis. But, in the providence of God, he met Paul and was converted!

Now what? Perhaps Onesimus should remain with Paul, who needed all the assistance he could get. But what about the slave's responsibilities to his master back in Colosse? The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave, but Philemon was a Christian. If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony? What a dilemma!

Along with the epistle to the Colossians, this letter probably was carried to Colosse by Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9). In it, we see Paul in three important roles as he tried to help Philemon solve his problems. At the same time, we see a beautiful picture of what the Father has done for us in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther said, "All of us are Onesimuses!" and he was right.

#### Paul, the Beloved Friend (1-7)

Paul had not founded the church in Colosse, nor had he visited it (Col. 1:1-8; 2:1). It is likely that the church started as a result of his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10, 20, 26) and that Epaphras was the founding pastor (Philem. 23). The church met in the home of Philemon and Apphia, his wife. Some people assume that Archippus was their son, but this is not certain. He may have been the elder who took the place of Epaphras, who had gone to Rome to help Paul. If this is true, then it would explain Paul's strong admonition to Archippus in Colossians 4:17, a letter written to the whole church.

In his greeting, Paul expressed his deep love for his Christian friends, and he reminded them that he was a prisoner for Jesus Christ (see also Philem. 9-10, 13, 23). Timothy was included in the greeting, though the burden of the letter was from the heart of Paul to the heart of Philemon. Paul's ministry was a "team" operation, and he often included the names of his associates when he wrote his letters. He liked to use the term "fellow worker" (see Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Col. 4:11).

The New Testament churches met in homes (Rom. 16:5, 23; 1 Cor. 16:19), and perhaps the church in Philemon's house was one of two assemblies in Colosse (Col. 4:15). Paul had won Philemon to faith in Christ (see Philem. 19), and Philemon became a blessing to other Christians (Philem. 7).

It was customary for Paul to open his letters with words of thanks and praise to God. (Galatians is an exception.) In his thanksgiving, Paul described his friend as a man of love and faith, both toward Jesus Christ and God's people. His love was practical: he "refreshed" the saints through his words and work.

Paul told Philemon that he was praying for him and asking God to make his witness effective ("the sharing of your faith") so that others would trust Christ. He also prayed that his friend would have a deeper understanding of all that he had in Jesus Christ. After all, the better we know Christ and experience His blessings, the more we want to share these blessings with others.

#### Paul, the Beseeching Intercessor (8-16)

Estimates suggest that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire, men and women who were treated like pieces of merchandise to buy and sell. A familiar proverb was "So many slaves, just so many enemies." The average slave sold for five hundred denarii (one denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer), while the educated and skilled slaves were priced as high as fifty thousand denarii. A master could free a slave, and a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money (Acts 22:28).

If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the "wanted" list. Any free citizen who found a runaway slave could assume custody and even intercede with the owner. The slave was not automatically returned to the owner, nor was he automatically sentenced to death. While it is true that some masters were cruel (one man threw his slave into a pool of man-eating fish!), many of them were reasonable and humane. After all, a slave was an expensive and useful piece of personal property, and it would cost the owner to lose him.

As Paul interceded for Onesimus, he presented his strong appeals. He began with Philemon's reputation as a man who brought blessing to others. The word "wherefore" in Philemon 8 carries the meaning of "accordingly." Since Philemon was a "refreshing" believer, Paul wanted to give him an opportunity to refresh the apostle's heart! Philemon had been a great blessing to many saints, and now he could be a blessing to one of his own slaves who had just been saved.

Paul might have used apostolic authority and ordered his friend to obey, but he preferred to appeal to Christian love (Philem. 9). See how tactfully he reminded Philemon of his own personal situation: "Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Philem. 9). Who could turn down the request of a suffering saint like Paul! He was perhaps sixty years old at this time, but that was a good age for men in that era. Along with Philemon's gracious character and Christian love, Paul's third appeal was the conversion of Onesimus (Philem. 10). Onesimus was no longer "just a slave"; he was now Paul's son in the faith and Philemon's Christian brother! In Jesus Christ, there

for Paul to open his letters with praise to God. (Galatians is an example of thanksgiving, Paul described his love and faith, both toward Jesus and people. His love was practical: he lived through his words and work. Paul knew that he was praying for him and that his witness effective ("the sharing of the faith" would trust Christ. He knew that others would have a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ. After all, the apostle had in Jesus Christ. His blessings, to share these blessings with others.

### Paul, the Burdened Partner (8-16)

There were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire, men and women who were treated as property to buy and sell. A familiar sight was slaves, just so many enemies. A slave was sold for five hundred denarii (one day's wage for a common laborer), while free slaves were priced as high as five hundred denarii. A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money.

Paul, the master would register the slave with the officials, and the slave would be on the "wanted" list. Any free citizen who could assume custody and even own the slave. The slave was not automatically free, nor was he automatically a free citizen, while it is true that some masters would free their slave into a pool of manumission. If they were reasonable and the slave was an expensive and useful property, and it would cost the owner

Paul, for Onesimus, he presented five appeals. Paul began with Philemon's reputation as a good man. The word "refreshing" in Philemon 8 carries the meaning of "refreshing." Paul was a "refreshing" man to give him an opportunity to hear! Philemon had been a great man, and now he could be a blessing to others. Paul used apostolic authority and obey, but he preferred to appeal in Paul's name. 9). See how tactfully Paul of his own personal situation: Paul was also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul would turn down the request of a slave. He was perhaps sixty years old at the time. A good age for men in that day. Paul's gracious character and his third appeal was the conversion of Onesimus. 10). Onesimus was no longer Paul's son in the faith and brother! In Jesus Christ, there is

"neither bond nor free" (Gal. 3:28). This does not mean that his conversion altered Onesimus's legal position as a slave, or that it canceled his debt to the law or to his master. However, it did mean that Onesimus had a new standing before God and before God's people, and Philemon had to take this into consideration.

The fourth appeal was that Onesimus was valuable to Paul in his ministry in Rome (Philem. 11-14). The name Onesimus means "profitable," so there is a play on words in Philemon 11. (The name Philemon means "affectionate" or "one who is kind." If the slave was expected to live up to his name, then what about the master?) Paul loved Onesimus and would have kept him in Rome as a fellow worker, but he did not want to tell Philemon what to do. Voluntary sacrifice and service, motivated by love, is what the Lord wants from His children.

The fifth appeal relates to the providence of God (Philem. 15-16). Paul was not dogmatic ("perhaps") as he made this telling point: as Christians, we must believe that God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life. God permitted Onesimus to go to Rome that he might meet Paul and become a believer. (Certainly Philemon and his family had witnessed to the slave and prayed for him.) Onesimus departed so he could come back. He was gone a short time so that he and his master might be together forever. He left for Rome a slave, but he would return to Colosse a brother. How gracious God was to rule and overrule in these affairs!

As you review these five appeals, you can see how Paul tenderly convinced his friend Philemon that he should receive his disobedient slave and forgive him. But it would not be easy for Philemon to do this. If he was too easy on Onesimus, it might influence other slaves to "become Christians" and want to influence their masters. However, if he was too hard on the man, it might affect Philemon's testimony and ministry in Colosse.

At this point, Paul offered the perfect solution. It was a costly solution as far as the apostle was concerned, but he was willing to pay the price.

### Paul, the Burdened Partner (17-25)

The word translated "partner" is *koinonia*, which means "to have in common." It is translated "communication" in Philemon 6, which means "fellowship." Paul volunteered to become a "business partner" with Philemon and help him solve the problem with Onesimus. He made two suggestions: "Receive him as myself," and "Put that [whatever he stole from you] on my account."

As Philemon's new "partner," Paul could not leave Rome and go to Colosse, but he could send Onesimus as his personal representative. "The way you treat Onesimus is the way you treat me," said the apostle. "He is to me as my own heart" (Philem. 12).

This is to me an illustration of what Jesus Christ has done for us as believers. God's people are so identified

with Jesus Christ that God receives them as He receives His Son! We are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6) and clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We certainly cannot approach God with any merit of our own, but God must receive us when we come to Him "in Jesus Christ." The word receive in Philemon 17 means "to receive into one's family circle." Imagine a slave entering his master's family! But imagine a guilty sinner entering God's family!

Paul did not suggest that Philemon ignore the slave's crimes and forget about the debt Onesimus owed. Rather, Paul offered to pay the debt himself. "Put it on my account—I will repay it!" The language in Philemon 19 sounds like a legal promissory note of that time. This was Paul's assurance to his friend that the debt would be paid.

It takes more than love to solve the problem; love must pay a price. God does not save us by His love, for though He loves the whole world, the whole world is not saved. God saves sinners by His grace (Eph. 2:8-9), and grace is love that pays a price. God in His holiness could not ignore the debt that we owe, for God must be faithful to His own law. So He paid the debt for us!

Theologians call this "the doctrine of imputation." (To impute means "to put it on account.") When Jesus Christ died on the cross, my sins were put on His account, and He was treated the way I should have been treated. When I trusted Him as my Savior, His righteousness was put on my account, and now God accepts me in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the Father, "He no longer owes You a debt because I paid it fully on the cross. Receive him as You would receive Me. Let him come into the family circle!"

However, we must keep in mind that there is a difference between being accepted in Christ and acceptable to Christ. Anyone who trusts Jesus Christ for salvation is accepted in Him (Rom. 4:1-4). But the believer must strive with God's help to be acceptable to the Lord in his daily life (Rom. 12:2; 14:18; 2 Cor. 5:9; Heb. 12:28 *nrsv*). The Father wants to look at those who are in His Son and say of them as He said of Jesus, "I am well pleased!"

Philemon 19 suggests that it was Paul who led Philemon to faith in Christ. Paul used this special relationship to encourage his friend to receive Onesimus. Philemon and Onesimus were not only spiritual brothers in the Lord, but they had the same "spiritual father"—Paul! (see Philem. 10; 1 Cor. 4:15)

Was Paul hinting in Philemon 21 that Philemon should do even more and free Onesimus? For that matter, why did he not come right out and condemn slavery? This letter certainly would have been the ideal place to do it. Paul did not "condemn" slavery in this letter or in any of his letters, though he often had a word of admonition for slaves and their masters (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10). In fact he encouraged Christian slaves to obtain their freedom if they could (1 Cor. 7:21-24).

During the American Civil War, both sides used the

## Philemon

same Bible to "prove" their cases for or against slavery. One of the popular arguments was, "If slavery is so wrong, why did Jesus and the apostles say nothing against it? Paul gave instructions to regulate slavery, but he did not condemn it."

One of the best explanations was given by Alexander Maclaren in his commentary on Colossians in *The Expositor's Bible* (Eerdmans, 1940; vol. VI, 301):

First, the message of Christianity is primarily to individuals, and only secondarily to society. It leaves the units whom it has influenced to influence the mass. Second, it acts on spiritual and moral sentiment, and only afterwards and consequently on deeds or institutions. Third, it hates violence, and trusts wholly to enlightened conscience. So it meddles directly with no political or social arrangements, but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these, and leaves them to soak into the general mind.

Had the early Christians begun an open crusade against slavery, they would have been crushed by the opposition, and the message of the gospel would have become confused with a social and political program. Think of how difficult it was for people to overcome slavery in England and America, and those two nations had general education and the Christian religion to help prepare the way. Think also of the struggles in the modern Civil Rights movement even within the church. If the battle for freedom was difficult for us to win in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what would the struggle have been like back in the first century?

Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16), and their spiritual influence must be felt in society to the glory of God. God used Joseph in Egypt, Esther and Nehemiah in Persia, and Daniel in Babylon, and throughout church history, there have been believers in political offices who have

faithfully served the Lord. But Christians in the Roman Empire could not work through local democratic political structures as we can today, so they really had no political power to bring about change. The change had to come from within, even though it took centuries for slavery to end.

Paul closed the letter with his usual personal requests and greetings. He fully expected to be released and to visit Philemon and Apphia in Colosse ("you" in Philem. 22 is plural). Even this fact would encourage Philemon to follow Paul's instructions, for he certainly would not want to be ashamed when he met the apostle face-to-face.

As we have seen, Epaphras was probably the pastor of the church; and he had gone to Rome to assist Paul. Whether he was a "voluntary prisoner" for Paul's sake, or whether he had actually been arrested by the Romans, we do not know. We must commend him for his dedication to Christ and to Paul.

John Mark was with Paul (Col. 4:10), the young man who failed Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:36-41). Paul had forgiven Mark and was grateful for his faithful ministry (see 2 Tim. 4:11).

Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:29; 27:2). Demas is mentioned three times in Paul's letters: "Demas ... my fellow worker" (Philem. 24); "Demas" (Col. 4:14); "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). John Mark failed but was restored. Demas seemed to be doing well but then he fell.

Luke, of course, was the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) who accompanied Paul, ministered to him, and eventually wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Paul's benediction was his "official signature" for his letters (2 Thess. 3:17-18), and it magnified the grace of God. After all, it was the grace of Jesus Christ that made our salvation possible (Eph. 2:1-10). It was He who said, "Charge that to My account! Receive thanks. You would receive Me!"

H E

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke  
John  
Acts  
Romans  
Corinthians

## OUTLINE

Key theme: Press on  
Key verse: Hebrews

## A SUPERIOR PERSON

- A. Better than the world (Exhortation: 2:1-4)
- B. Better than the world (Exhortation: 4:13)
- C. Better than the world (Exhortation: 5:11-6:20)

## A SUPERIOR PRIEST

- A. A superior order
- B. A superior covering
- C. A superior sacrifice
- D. A superior sacrifice despising the world

## A SUPERIOR PRINCE

- A. The great example
- B. The endurance of the cross (Exhortation: 12:14-29)
- C. Closing practical