

Philemon

Tonight we are going to study one of the shortest books in the Bible – the book of Philemon. This New Testament epistle has just one chapter and 25 verses, and can easily be read in a single sitting. It doesn't get a lot of attention, but it tells a fascinating story.

Before we get into this book we need a little bit of background. The book of Philemon was written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, which occurred in 62 AD. While Paul was in prison he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. He also took the time to write this letter, which he sent to a friend. The reason he wrote this letter is because he happened to meet a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Most of Paul's letters were written to churches in order to address various problems that they were facing. This particular letter is different: it was written to a family in order to address the issue of their runaway slave. Paul wrote this letter with one clear goal in mind: setting Onesimus free. What is fascinating is the way Paul went about accomplishing that goal.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a very serious matter. It is estimated that around one third of Italy's entire population was slaves. Slaves were considered to be property, and masters had the right to put them to death for very small offenses. Rome was in constant fear of slave revolts and experienced three significant rebellions in its history. This fear led them to treat runaway slaves very harshly. The laws regarding runaway slaves were very strict: if you found one you were required to turn him in so he could be returned to his master – where he stood a good chance of being crucified and killed.

When Paul met Onesimus he was under a legal obligation to turn him into the authorities. However, Paul did not do that. Instead he took a different approach – and that is what we are going to investigate tonight.

It seems that when Paul met Onesimus, the first thing he did was share the gospel with him. Under Paul's care and teaching Onesimus came to know the Lord. Once Onesimus was a Christian, Paul then wrote a very interesting letter to his master Philemon – and that is the letter we are going to study tonight.

Now, there were a lot of different ways Paul could have handled this situation. Paul was an apostle, after all; he had a lot of influence in the churches, he was well-known, and he was highly respected. Paul could have addressed Philemon with great force – but he didn't. Instead he took a very different approach. Paul once told Timothy to be very careful when dealing with other believers:

[Slide 1]

1 Timothy 5:1: “Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren;

Paul said that Christians ought to treat older men with respect and younger men as brothers. Instead of going into the situation and using force to deal with it, Paul urged Timothy to be gentle and courteous. In this letter to Philemon we will see this principle in action. There are a lot of things Paul could have said, but he chose to be very gentle – and yet Paul still put an incredible amount of pressure on Philemon.

Look at how Paul opened the letter:

[Slide 2]

Philemon 1:1: “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,”

In most of Paul's letters he always started by identifying himself as an apostle. He used his apostolic position to establish his authority and make it clear that the recipient of the letter should listen to him. In this letter to Philemon, however, Paul doesn't do that. He *could* have said “Hey Philemon! It's me, Paul the apostle. You have to do whatever I tell you because *I'm an apostle*.” But Paul doesn't do that. Paul didn't use his authority to force Philemon to do anything. Instead he worked on Philemon's *emotions*. He didn't call himself Paul the apostle; instead he called himself Paul the *prisoner*. He painted a picture of himself as a prisoner who was locked away in Rome and suffering on behalf of the gospel.

After Paul established himself as a suffering prisoner, he highly praised Philemon. He described him as someone who was “dearly beloved”. Philemon was a “fellowlaborer”. This is high praise! How would you like it if Paul called *you* a fellow-laborer in Christ?

Paul did not stop at greeting Philemon. He also greeted the rest of his family:

[Slide 3]

Philemon 1:2: “And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:”

Apphia was probably Philemon's wife. This is significant, because in Roman times the wife was the one who had authority over the slaves. Since Paul was writing about an escaped slave, this was something that directly affected her. Archippus was probably Philemon's son.

Verse 2 tells us that there was a church in Philemon's house, which is not too surprising. In those days Christians did not meet in church buildings, the way we do today; instead they met in the homes of believers. Philemon had a church that met in his house, but although Paul mentions it he is not address this letter to it. This is because Paul was addressing a private family matter – the matter of the escaped slave Onesimus.

Paul was still not done with the introduction of his letter. He went on to say that he was praying for Philemon, even though Paul was in prison (and therefore Philemon really should be praying for him):

[Slide 4]

Philemon 1:4: “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,”

He also praised Philemon's faith and love:

[Slide 5]

Philemon 1:5: “Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;”

Notice that at the end of this verse Paul said that Philemon had a lot of love and faith for *all* saints. This is important! Philemon doesn't know it yet but his slave Onesimus is now a Christian,

which means he is part of “all saints”. As we will see, Paul will make the case that since Philemon has a great love for the saints of God, this means he should also have a great love for Onesimus as well.

Paul then praised Philemon's hospitality:

[Slide 6]

Philemon 1:7: “For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”

Paul has spent almost a third of this letter just greeting Philemon – but there is a strategic purpose behind this. Paul was thanking Philemon for several very specific things: for being loving and kind, for being good to the saints, and for being very hospitable. Paul is going to take advantage of those traits and tell Philemon that he should apply them to his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to show Onesimus that same love, that same kindness, and that same hospitality. After this gracious introduction it's going to be very hard for Philemon to refuse Paul.

Once the introduction has been concluded the apostle gets to the heart of the letter. He first makes it clear that Paul does indeed have apostolic authority. Paul could have come down hard on Philemon, but he instead chose to entreat him as a brother:

[Slide 7]

Philemon 1:8: “Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

Paul reminded Philemon that he was a prisoner in Rome – and on top of that he was an old man. Philemon wouldn't refuse the request of a suffering prisoner, would he? Surely Philemon wouldn't say no to an old man who was suffering for the cause of Christ. After all, Philemon was a loving and hospitable person, and no loving person would dare do something that heartless.

Do you see what's going on? When Philemon read this he couldn't possibly have missed the point. Paul was making it very hard for Philemon to refuse what he was about to ask – and he's barely gotten started. Paul went on to describe Onesimus as his own son:

[Slide 8]

Philemon 1:10: “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:”

Philemon would have had some rather bad memories of Onesimus, the slave who ran away from him. But now Philemon would find it difficult to be hard on Onesimus. After all, Paul the apostle – the man who wrote a large portion of the New Testament, and whom God used to do mighty miracles – just called Onesimus *his son*. Paul was clearly very attached to him! Onesimus wasn't a simple runaway slave anymore. Now he is a favorite of one of the most prominent leaders of the early church. That creates a whole different situation. If Philemon does anything to harm him then Paul is going to find out about it – and I'm sure Philemon didn't want Paul coming after him. (Would you?)

Paul then referred to Onesimus' past – but he does so in a rather interesting way:

[Slide 9]

Philemon 1:11: “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:”

What we miss in the English translation is the fact that the name Onesimus actually means *profitable*. Paul was making a play on Onesimus' name. In the past he was *unprofitable*, but now things have changed. Onesimus wasn't a runaway slave anymore. He was now a fellow saint who was profitable to Philemon *and* to Paul. Therefore, Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus with great kindness:

[Slide 10]

Philemon 1:12: “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:”

The King James Version has a very literal way of translating this verse. In ancient times the bowels were believed to be the seat of human emotions. Today we would use the word “heart” instead. Paul was basically telling Philemon that he loved Onesimus like a son and Philemon should treat him with great care. Paul didn't want Philemon to crucify Onesimus or have him torn apart by lions.

Yes, Paul does send Onesimus back to Philemon, but he didn't turn Onesimus over to the authorities. He also didn't send Onesimus back alone. The journey back to Philemon would have been a long and hazardous one, and Onesimus could have easily ended up arrested. Therefore Paul sent him back in the company of someone else. Although the letter to Philemon doesn't discuss the travel arrangements, we can find them in Paul's letter to Colossians:

[Slide 11]

Colossians 4:7: “All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: ...
9 With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.”

Onesimus was indeed going back – but Tychicus was going to be there to see what happened. Interestingly, Paul made it clear that he actually wanted Onesimus to stay with him:

[Slide 12]

Philemon 1:13: “Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:
14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”

Once again we see Paul mentioning the fact that he was a prisoner for the sake of Christ. The apostle told Philemon that he was suffering in prison and *really* needed some help so he could continue

to spread the gospel. In fact, what he actually needed was the help of Onesimus – but Paul didn't want to use his authority to just take Onesimus by force. He wanted Philemon to willingly let Onesimus go.

That was going to be a very difficult request for Philemon to refuse, wasn't it? Paul just praised Philemon for being a great guy who was devoted to the cause of Christ. The apostle Paul happened to have a need that was directly tied to the gospel, and it was a need that Philemon could meet. How could Philemon refuse him? Only a monster would say “Yes, Paul, I know you're in prison and I know you need my help, but I just don't care.” Remember, Philemon actually had a church *in his house*. If he turned Paul down, his congregation was definitely going to hear about it. How could Philemon explain to his church that he refused to help a suffering apostle who was in prison?

Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free, and he wanted Philemon to do it willingly. The apostle was putting a *lot* of pressure on Philemon to let Onesimus go. But Paul wasn't done yet. He next tried to change Philemon's attitude toward Onesimus:

[Slide 13]

Philemon 1:15: “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”

Paul told Philemon that perhaps it was God's will for Onesimus to run away so that he could be converted and become a Christian. Yes, he did indeed run away, but in the end it was a blessing. God used the situation to save his soul from Hell and transform his life. Paul wanted Philemon to actually *rejoice* that Onesimus left him! The apostle was working to change Philemon's attitude about the entire situation. Onesimus was no longer a mere slave; instead Philemon should see him as a *beloved brother*. Since Philemon loved the saints he ought to love Onesimus as well. In fact, Philemon should rejoice over this because it brought someone to Christ.

As you can see, Paul is working hard on Onesimus' behalf and was seeking to change Philemon's attitude. Runaway slaves were typically greeted with torture and death. Paul, however, wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he was Paul himself:

[Slide 14]

Philemon 1:17: “If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”

“Do you consider me to be a partner in the gospel, Philemon?” What a question to ask! Paul was *much* more than just a partner; why, Paul had done more to spread the gospel than Philemon could ever hope to match. Philemon was not worthy to be compared with Paul – and yet Paul was making that comparison. Paul was saying that if Philemon considered him, Paul the apostle, to be a fellow laborer in the gospel, then Philemon should treat Onesimus the same way he would treat Paul himself. Philemon should not beat Onesimus and kill him; instead he should welcome him back with love and grace.

But Paul was still not done. It seems that Onesimus did more than just run away from his master; he apparently wronged Philemon in other ways as well. Whatever he did, Paul said to put it on his account:

[Slide 15]

Philemon 1:18: “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”

Philemon couldn't prosecute Onesimus for anything because Paul said he would repay it personally. Did Onesimus steal anything? Did he wrong anyone? Then send the bill to Paul. The apostle would cover Onesimus' debt.

Since Paul wrote this, there was no way for Philemon to prosecute his runaway slave without looking like a complete jerk. Philemon couldn't just ignore the apostle – but at the same time, imagine how awkward it would have been for Philemon to try to send Paul a bill! There Paul was, in prison, suffering for the gospel. Only a callous monster would say “Yes, Paul, I know you're in jail and everything, but here's the bill that you owe. Please take the donations that the churches are giving you to keep you alive and send them to me. Thanks.” Although Philemon *could* do that, and I have no doubt that Paul was serious about paying Onesimus' debt, you would have to have a heart of stone to write that sort of bill.

Just in case Philemon was unhappy about this turn of events, Paul reminded him (in a rather clever way) that Philemon owed *him* a great debt. It seemed that Philemon himself came to know Christ through the ministry of Paul. Paul was saying “Yes, it's true that Onesimus owes you a debt. But don't forget that you owe *me* a debt as well, and I have never tried to collect on it.”

The parallels here between what Paul did for Onesimus and what Christ did for us are very clear, and I'm sure Philemon could not have missed it. Paul was taking upon himself the wrong that Onesimus did, and was offering to pay for it. Christ took upon Himself the wrongs that we did, and paid for them on the cross. Paul was reminding Philemon that just as he was forgiven, he should also forgive those who wronged him.

Paul *still* wasn't done. He goes on:

[Slide 16]

Philemon 1:20: “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.”

Paul, the aged apostle, was suffering in prison for the cause of Christ. He needed Philemon's help. Surely Philemon was going to help, right? Surely Philemon was going to give Paul a bit of joy in the dark prison where he was languishing. Surely Philemon wasn't going to make things worse and bring him pain.

That is what Paul was saying here. It's true that he wasn't giving Philemon orders, but there was no way Philemon could have missed what Paul was saying. Paul wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, to forgive him, to treat him as a brother in Christ, and then to send him back to Paul. In fact, Paul tells Philemon that he was confident that Philemon would do more than he asked:

[Slide 17]

Philemon 1:21: “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”

It would have been *enormously* difficult for Philemon to refuse Paul's request. After everything Paul wrote it would have been very awkward for Philemon to write back and say "Paul, I know you have confidence in me. I know you said you would pay his debt and I know I owe you my life, but your confidence in me is misplaced. I'm not going to listen to you." Paul has been very gentle about it, but he has maneuvered Philemon into a corner.

I don't know what sort of person Philemon was; the Bible doesn't mention him anywhere else, and history does not record how this story turned out. But if Paul was confident that Philemon would do more than Paul asked, he was probably right. But Paul still added some extra insurance to his letter:

[Slide 18]

Philemon 1:22: "But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you."

Paul was telling Philemon that one day he would get out of prison (which did happen), and when that occurred he was going to go visit Philemon. When Paul visited Philemon he was going to find out how he treated Onesimus. This could be interpreted as a subtle warning: one way or another Paul would find out what happened and would hold Philemon accountable.

Interestingly, Ignatius wrote in 110 AD that the bishop of Ephesus was a person named Onesimus. Now, no one knows if it was the same Onesimus that is mentioned in this letter, but it is possible. If he was just a teenager when he was Philemon's slave then he could have lived long enough to be that same person. It would be nice to think that Philemon did everything Paul asked, and Onesimus later became one of the leaders of the church.

This letter is primarily focused on Paul's dealings with Philemon, but I think there is another factor to consider. As we know, this letter was included in the canon of the New Testament. This means that this letter must have been passed around to the other churches back in the time when it was written. Philemon was not the only person who read it; other slaveholders probably did as well.

When they read this letter, what would they have learned from it? Well, it was obvious that Paul wanted the gospel to be preached to everyone – even to slaves. Paul wanted converts to Christ to come from every walk in life. But there's more to it than that: Paul showed tremendous love and kindness to Onesimus. He ignored Roman law and treated him as a brother, and not as property. He wanted Onesimus to be loved as a fellow saint, and he wanted Onesimus to be set free so he could serve the Lord and advance the gospel.

Yes, slaveholders could just ignore this letter and do as they pleased – just as people ignore the Bible all the time and live as they see fit. But no honest man could miss the plain desire of the apostles. Paul was being very gentle here, but he was absolutely crystal clear about what he wanted to see done. He did not treat Onesimus as a slave; instead he treated him as his own son – and he wanted to see him set free.