

Philemon

In this lesson we're going to study one of the shortest books in the Bible: the book of Philemon. This New Testament epistle has only 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.

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 it was because he happened to meet a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Most of Paul's letters were addressed to churches, and were written to address various problems they were facing or explain certain doctrines. This letter is different: it was addressed to a family, and it was sent to address the issue of their runaway slave. Paul seemed to have one goal in mind when he wrote this letter: he wanted Onesimus to be freed. What's fascinating is the way he went about accomplishing that goal.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a very serious matter. It's estimated that around one third of Italy's entire population was slaves! In those days slaves were considered to be property and masters had the right to put them to death for 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 harshly. The laws regarding runaway slaves were 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 or killed.

When Paul met Onesimus he had a legal obligation to turn him in to the authorities. However, Paul didn't do that. Instead he took a different approach. It seems that when Paul met Onesimus he shared the gospel with him. Under Paul's care and teaching Onesimus came to know the Lord. Once Onesimus was a

Christian, Paul wrote a very interesting letter to his master Philemon – and that's the letter we're going to study.

There were a lot of ways Paul could have handled this situation. He 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 different approach. Paul once told Timothy to be careful when dealing with other believers:

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

Paul said that Christians should treat older men with respect and younger men as brothers. Instead of addressing the situation with force, he urged Timothy to be gentle and courteous. In this letter we'll see this principle in action. There are a lot of things Paul could have said but he chose to be gentle – and yet he still put a lot of pressure on Philemon.

Look at how Paul opened the letter:

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

In many of Paul's letters he began 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 his letter to Philemon, however, he didn'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 that's not what he did. He didn't try to use his authority to force Philemon to do something. Instead he worked on Philemon's *emotions*. He didn't call himself Paul the apostle; instead he called himself Paul the *prisoner*. He reminded Philemon that he was a prisoner who was suffering in Rome for the sake 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 was high praise! How would you like it if Paul called *you* a fellow-laborer in Christ?

Paul didn't stop at greeting Philemon. He also greeted the rest of his family as well:

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 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 there was a church in Philemon's house, which isn't too surprising. In those days Christians didn't meet in church buildings, the way we do today. Instead they met in the homes of believers. Philemon had a church which met in his house, but although Paul mentioned it he didn't address this letter to it. That's because Paul was addressing a private family issue – the matter of their escaped slave Onesimus.

Paul still wasn't done with his introduction. He went on to say that he was praying for Philemon, even though he was in prison (and therefore Philemon should have been praying for him):

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

He also praised Philemon's faith and love:

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 didn't know it yet but his slave Onesimus was now a Christian, which meant he was part of "all saints". As we'll see, Paul was going to make the case that since Philemon had a great love for the saints of God, this meant he should also have a great love for Onesimus as well.

Paul praised Philemon's hospitality:

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

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

Once the introduction had been concluded, the apostle got to the heart of the matter. He first made it clear that he did indeed have apostolic authority. Paul could have come down hard on Philemon but instead he chose to entreat him as a brother:

Philemon 1:8-9: "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, 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 once again 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 he wouldn't say no to an old man who was being persecuted 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? Paul was making it 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:

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

Philemon may have had some bad memories of Onesimus, the slave who ran away from him. But now he would find it difficult to be hard on Onesimus because Paul the apostle – the man who wrote a large portion of the New Testament, and whom God used to do mighty miracles – called Onesimus *his son*. Paul was clearly very attached to him! Onesimus wasn't just a runaway slave anymore. Now he was loved by one of the most prominent leaders of the early church. That created a different situation. If Philemon did anything to harm Onesimus then Paul was going to hear about it – and it's quite possible Philemon didn't want Paul coming after him. (Would you?)

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

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 had changed. Onesimus wasn't just 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:

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 people believed the bowels were the seat of human emotions. Today we'd use the word “heart” instead. Paul was 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.

It's true that Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, but he didn't turn him over to the authorities. He also didn't send Onesimus back alone. The return journey to Philemon would have been a long and hazardous one, and Onesimus could have been arrested. That may be why 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:

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 it seems that Tychicus was going to be there to see what happened.

Paul made it clear that he actually wanted Onesimus to remain with him:

Philemon 1:13-14: “Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: 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 mention 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 needed was the help of Onesimus – but Paul didn't want to use his authority to take Onesimus by force. He wanted Philemon to willingly set Onesimus free.

That was going to be difficult request for Philemon to refuse, wasn't it? Paul just praised Philemon for being a great person who was devoted to the cause of Christ. The apostle happened to have a need that was directly tied to the gospel, and it was a need 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 don't care.” Remember, Philemon actually had a church *in his house*. If he turned Paul down then his congregation was most likely 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:

Philemon 1:15-16: “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 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 he could be converted and become a Christian. It's true that he ran 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 *rejoice* that Onesimus left him! The apostle was working to change Philemon's attitude about the situation. Paul didn't want Philemon to view Onesimus as slave; instead he wanted Philemon to see him as a beloved brother in Christ. 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 was working hard on Onesimus' behalf and was trying change Philemon's attitude. Runaway slaves were often met with torture and death, but Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he was Paul himself:

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

Do you see what Paul is doing? "Do you consider me to be a partner in the gospel, Philemon?" What a question to ask! Philemon wasn't worthy to be compared with Paul – and yet Paul was making that comparison anyway. He was saying that if Philemon considered him, Paul the apostle, to be a fellow laborer in the gospel then he should treat Onesimus the same way he would treat Paul himself. Philemon shouldn't beat Onesimus or kill him. Instead he should welcome him back with love and grace *and set him free.*

But Paul still wasn't 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:

Philemon 1:18-19: "If he hath wronged thee, or

oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; 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.

This letter made it very difficult 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! Paul was in prison, suffering for the sake of Christ. Only a callous monster would say “Yes, Paul, I know you're in jail, but here's the bill you owe. Please take the donations that the churches are giving you and send them to me instead. Thanks.” Although Philemon *could* do that, and I have no doubt Paul was serious about paying Onesimus' debt, you'd have to have a heart of stone to do that.

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 seems that Philemon came to know Christ through Paul's ministry. Paul was saying “It's true that Onesimus owes you a debt. But don't forget that you owe *me* a debt as well, and I've never tried to collect on it.”

There are clear parallels between what Paul did for Onesimus and what Christ did for us, and it's quite likely Philemon saw what was going on. Paul was taking upon himself the wrong that Onesimus did and was offering to pay it. Christ took upon Himself the wrongs that we did, and paid for them on the cross. Paul was subtly reminding Philemon that just as Christ forgave him, he should also forgive those who wronged him.

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

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 him, right? Surely Philemon was going to give him 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's what Paul was saying here. It's true that he wasn't giving Philemon orders, but it's very unlikely Philemon missed what Paul was telling him. 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 as a free man.

Paul even said that he was confident Philemon would do more than he asked:

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 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 in this matter.” Paul had been very gentle about it but he still 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 doesn't record what happened next. But if Paul was confident that Philemon would do more than Paul asked then he was probably right.

Yet Paul still added some extra insurance to his letter:

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 planning on visiting Philemon. When Paul visited Philemon he would learn what happened to 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. No one knows if this was the same Onesimus who is mentioned in this letter, but it's possible. If he was 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's another factor to consider. As we know, this letter was included in the canon of the New Testament. That means this letter must have been passed around to other churches back when it was written. Philemon therefore wasn't the only person who read it. Other slaveholders would have read it as well.

When they read this letter, what would they have learned from it? Well, it's obvious that Paul wanted the gospel to be preached to everyone – even to slaves. Paul wanted to save souls 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.

It's true that slaveholders could ignore this letter and do as they pleased – just as people ignore the Bible all the time and live as they see fit. But this book makes it very clear how Paul wanted slaves to be treated. He was very gentle about it but he left no questions regarding what he wanted done. He didn't treat

Onesimus as a slave. Instead he treated him as his own son – and he wanted him to be freed.