

The Epistle to PHILEMON

Introduction: This is one of the most extraordinary epistles (letters) in the Scripture – Conversion from slave to a bond-servant

The New Testament letters were a new form of communicative revelations. Prior to the propitiation of Christ, God communicated His desires and will for His creation through the priest, prophets, the Law, history, songs, and poetry. God began using evangelism as a more personal and direct method, mostly to the new churches but some were directed to individuals and can be fairly informal.

Both Paul and Peter seemed to have some indication that what they were writing had long-lasting profundity. Peter here makes the clearest comment in the New Testament that Paul's writings are inspired as are the rest of the Scriptures, confirming what Paul, a scholar on the Old Testament said about them in

- ✓ **2nd Timothy 3:16; *All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness,***
- ✓ **2nd Peter 1:20-21; *First of all, you should know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation,²¹ because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.***
- ✓ **Peter writes of the Apostle Paul's letters 2nd Peter 3:15 "*Also, regard the patience of our Lord as [an opportunity for] salvation, just as our dear brother Paul has written to you according to the wisdom given to him.*" (all HCSB)**

When we come to the Letter to Philemon it gets down to a personal level, but it is filled with Christ's expectation about **Christian-Living, which the Holy Spirit included in the Bible for this purpose. The Revelation of Christ's love for us; demonstration of**

how brotherly love should work; therefore, the *primary* purpose of this epistle is to reveal Christ's love for us in what He did for us in pleading our case before God. As we read this epistle, it is almost as if we are snooping and reading Philemon's mail, over his shoulder. ⁱ Dr. McGee writes a wonderful preface to the letter in "Thru the Bible" and I can add nothing to it.

"Behind this epistle, there is a story, of course. Philemon lived in a place called Colossae. It was way up in the Phrygian country in the Anatolian section of what is Turkey today. No city is there today—just ruins. But it was a great city in Paul's day. One of Paul's epistles was written to the Colossian believers. There is no record that Paul ever visited Colossae, but since there are many things we do not know, I suspect that Paul did visit that city.

The story of this epistle was enacted on the black background of slavery. There were approximately sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire where the total population did not exceed one hundred twenty million. A slave was a chattel. He was treated worse than an enemy. He was subject to the whim of his master.

In Colossae was this very rich man who had come to saving faith in Christ. He apparently had come down to Ephesus, as Paul was there for two years speaking in the school of Tyrannus every day, and people were coming in from all over that area to hear him. There were millions of people in Asia Minor, and Philemon was just one of the men who came to know the Lord Jesus.

Now Philemon owned slaves, and he had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus took a chance one day, as any slave would have done, and made a run for it. He did what most runaway slaves apparently did—he moved into a great metropolis. This slave made it all the way to Rome. In that great population, he could be buried, as it were, and never be recognized.

One day, this man Onesimus, who had been a slave, found out that there was slavery in freedom and there was a freedom in slavery. When he was a slave, he didn't worry about where he was going to sleep or what he was going to eat. His master had to take care of that. Now he has a real problem in Rome. I can imagine him going down the street one day and seeing a group of people gathered around listening to a man. Onesimus wormed his way into the crowd, got up front, and saw that the man was in chains. Onesimus had run away from chains, and he thought he was free, but when he listened to that man—by the way, his

name was Paul—he thought, *That man's free, and I'm still a slave—a slave to appetite, a slave to the economy. I'm still a slave, but that man, although he is chained, is free.*

Onesimus waited until the others had drifted away and then went up to Paul. He wanted to know more about what Paul was preaching, and Paul led him to Christ; that is, he presented the gospel to him, told him how Jesus had died for him and how He had been buried but rose again on the third day. He asked Onesimus to put his trust in Christ, and he did. Onesimus became a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Then Onesimus did what any man does who has been converted; he thought back on his past life and the things which were wrong that he wanted to make right. He said to Paul, "Paul, there is something I must confess to you. I'm a runaway slave." Paul asked him where he had come from, and Onesimus told Paul it was from Asia Minor, from the city of Colossae. Paul said, "There's a church over there. Who was your master?"

"My master was Philemon."

"You mean Philemon who lives on Main Street?"

"Yes."

"Why, he is one of my converts also. He owes me a great deal."

"Well, Paul, do you think I should go back to him?"

"Yes, you should. Onesimus, you must go back, but you are going to go back to a different situation. I will send a letter with you."

And we have his letter before us—the Epistle of Paul to Philemon. In the human heart, there has always been a great desire to be free. But right now, there are millions of Americans who are slaves to alcohol. They are not free. They are alcoholics. Then there are those who are slaves to drugs. Some are slaves to the economy. There are slaves to the almighty dollar. We are living in a day when people pride themselves on being free. They think they are free, but the Lord Jesus said, "*Therefore if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.*" (John 8:36). You will not get arguments for or against slavery from this epistle. What you do learn is the freedom that is above all the slavery of this world. It is the freedom that every one of us wants to have."

The narrative about Onesimus is an inspiring one for the downtrodden; in some Eastern Orthodox churches, hold that Onesimus was a slave to Philemon of Colossae, a man of Christian faith. He possibly is the same Onesimus named by Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 107) as bishop in Ephesus, which would put Onesimus's death closer to 95 AD. Regardless, Onesimus went from slave to brother, to Bishop.

Philemon 1:1; *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother: To Philemon our dear friend and coworker,*

- An amicable greeting to Philemon, a friend, and a _____ along with the church family.

Obviously to its New Testament potential, the letter to Philemon is one of the Prison Epistles. It goes along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. When Paul says that He is a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” without mentioning the Roman jail in which he is imprisoned it seems to have a deeper meaning, yes, he is in jail by the Roman legal system, but he would not be there if Christ hadn’t orchestrated it for the Kingdoms sake. There are no oversights or accidents when you are a child of God.

He writes “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Having been incarcerated in a Roman prison, Paul was not shy about the comparison of his flesh serving out the remainder of his life in servitude to Jesus. A few of the commentaries try to change this and explain it away by teaching that Paul really meant that he considered himself like a prisoner chained to the rock of the gospel, unable to be his own person. But that is not what Paul said, and Paul had the ability to say exactly what he had in mind. The desires of his flesh were chained but his soul and Spirit were set free in Christ.

After the affable Greeting to Philemon and then the Family and complements the faithful reputation of Philemon among the brethren in verses 4 to 7. Based on his relationship with them he makes a plea for Onesimus in verses 8 to 16 as

Paul cashes in his friendship capital to redeem forgiveness for the slave in verse 17 and offers an acceptable transaction by personal attribution in verses 18 to 21.

In his 13 New Testament letters, Paul spoke a great deal about a new and innovative relationship between a servant suffering imprisonment and the master, but here he demonstrates the living application in the life of the born-again believer.

In the letter to Philemon, he demonstrates how it should work. These men, belonging to two different classes in the Roman Empire, the servant hating the master and hurting each other, are now brothers in Christ, and they are to act like it. This is the only solution to the problem of capital and labor.



I posted this photo only because of the convoluted thinking that is going on in upside down America, especially on the issue of reparation.

Philemon, 2; ^{to} Aphis our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your **home**.

➤ **In the absence of a regular church building, the _____s of particular saints were used for that purpose.**

Compiler's note: Do we know who Aphis was? I didn't know either, so I searched it and found these notes in the Revised Version margin. It has been supposed, since this epistle concerns one household exclusively, that Aphis was Philemon's wife and the mother or sister of Archippus (which see). She was stoned to death with Philemon, Onesimus, and Archippus in the reign of Nero.

ii The name Archippus means Master of the horse, a member of Philemon's family, and probably his son. He was the fellow Christian soldier that Paul encourages in Colossians 4:17; *"Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."*

Philemon 3-5; *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.*

➤ This is not an unusual greeting from Paul to every person and every church to which he wrote, yet he holds out Philemon as one that he regularly prays for, the life of Philemon was a testimony, his resolute reputation went before him, well known for his godly love and his faith toward the _____ Jesus and the fellowship that surrounds him.

Philemon 6; *[I pray] that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for [the glory of] Christ.*

➤ The life of Philemon was shared as a testimony. Every good thing that we do for others becomes an _____ witness to the reality of God's Spirit that restores and indwells us, restoring and reconciling us to the characteristics of Jesus, the result of that fact is that God "is working in [us enabling us for this purpose] *both to desire and to work out His good purpose.*" (Phil. 2:13).

Philemon 7; *For I have great joy and encouragement from your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.*

- **Paul, like any true evangelist, (my self-included) has found great joy and consolation in Philemon's love expressed to others. This overt demonstration of _____ has become a refresher of souls that encountered it. The new nature that is an intricate part of all true believers revealed a supernatural love and concern for fellow Christians, in the likeness of Jesus.**

Philemon 8; *For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, ⁹ I appeal [to you], instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus,*

- **In that era of obligatory slavery, a recaptured slave was severely punished or put to death, but here Paul is making a gracious plea for **Onesimus** {O ness a muss} as he approaches the primary purpose of this letter where He appeals for Onesimus's life based on _____, Philemon's love for Christ, for his respect for the apostle Paul's kingdom work in establishing many local churches, and out of his compassion for Paul's humble attitude and acceptance of being imprisoned for his Christianity knowing how the apostle had suffered and had been persecuted as an evangelist of Christ.**

Philemon 10; *I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I fathered him while [I was] in chains.*

- **Paul is pleading with Philemon on behalf of a man that he considered to be like a son, and in a similar manner to that which he also referred to both Timothy and Titus. Although Paul was not married, he had many that he _____ and counted them as spiritual sons among others that he had led to the Lord. He had led Onesimus (a runaway slave that belonged to Philemon) to the Lord even while Paul himself was imprisoned.**

Philemon 11; *Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back to you as a part of myself.*

- The name *Onesimus* has a literal meaning in the language of that day as “profitable,” so, Paul makes an insightful play on words. Since the name literally means profitable, Paul plays it as being of value, saying this servant was _____ to you when you had him, but with the change of nature, being born-again he has become useful to me in my chains, and now he will again be useful to you with a New Christ-like Attitude. As a slave he resented his status and wasn’t very useful, it went against his resentful nature, his heart was in it and who can blame him for that? But now as he returns to you, a believer with a new Christ-like nature, he will be useful, both to you, and me as a treasure in heaven.

Paul is sending him back to Philemon with this letter, as a believer, and he says, He is now going to be profitable to you. However, I don’t want him to be received as a slave, rather, as a brother in Christ, as if it were Paul himself that had returned. Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus just as if he were receiving Paul.

- iii Now Paul admits that he would have liked to have kept Onesimus. I’m sure Paul would say, “My first thought was that this man knows how to serve, and I need somebody. I am here in prison, old and sick, and cold. This fellow could help me. {McGee}

Philemon 13; *I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place.*

- Paul wrote, my first thought was to _____ him here and just let you know that I have him here with me. But Paul couldn’t do that, while on this side of Pentecost, Christians were no longer bound by the penalty of the Law, the commandments of God have not changed, and the Law still reflects the will of God for humanity. Paul wrote in Romans 7:7 Well then, am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful?

Of course not! In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet." (NLT2) To retain Onesimus would have deprived Philemon his servant and have been an act of covetousness on Paul's part.

Philemon 14; But *I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of **obligation**, but of your own free will.*

➤ **Paul is saying, "I wouldn't keep Onesimus because that would deprive you of an opportunity to store up treasure in heaven by the good deeds done to me and Onesimus. Paul could have requisite Onesimus's service out of his debilitating geriatric needs, but any sense of obligation might malign in some minds, the genuine testimony of the love shown by Philemon's gift yielded out of a perverted sense of _____, instead of a show of unambiguous Love.**

Paul was asking a lot if Philemon was merely a natural-born man, but he wasn't, he was born-again with a new Christ-like attitude of forgiveness, and by his gratitude, for Christ forgiveness, he should be able to forgive this slave who robbed him at Colossi and fled to Rome, where he was converted by Paul. We read that Onesimus was accompanied on his return by Tychicus, the bearer of the Epistle to the Colossians in Colossians 4:9 [Tychicus] ". . . is with Onesimus, a faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here."

iv **"The story of this fugitive Colossian slave is remarkable evidence of the freedom of access to the prisoner which was granted to all, and "a beautiful illustration both of the character of St. Paul and the transfiguring power and righteous principles of the gospel."**

Philemon 15 For ***perhaps*** this is why he was separated [from you] for a brief time so that you might get him back permanently,

Paul ponders, writing on paper, _____, God took privilege over this human event, in this case of the slave/master relationship and overcame the past evil to return an ultimate good to Philemon as he learned by practicing a form of Christian forgiveness, one that was amply illustrated by Joseph, concerning his brothers. [Gen.45:5]

Since Onesimus has become a believer, his status and relationship with Philemon are now different. He was still a slave according to Roman law, but he is more than that to Philemon. He is now a beloved brother.

Philemon 16; [Onesimus is] *no longer as a slave, but more than a **slave**—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but even more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

➤ So, what has become of this useless slave? He is "*no longer as a _____,*" but through Christ propitiation, he has become as a dearly loved brother, converted by the apostle Paul, who now sends him back to his master with the epistle which bears his name. In it, he implores Philemon to receive his reconciled slave as a "faithful and beloved brother."

Philemon 17; *So, if you consider me a **partner**, accept him as you would me.*

➤ In essence, in his appeal on behalf of Onesimus, Paul makes this request; either we stand with Christ as a _____ before God, or we have no standing at all. Onesimus was once a natural-born unprofitably resentful, a runaway slave who was led to Christ by Paul and has now been transformed into the Family of God, so Paul asks Philemon to receive him as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon 18: *And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*

- **This is one of the clearest illustrations of a Christ like reconciliation that is foreign to the old unforgiving nature; it is like the proxy of Christ on our behalf. Paul's credit with Philemon becomes a substitution for any wrongs committed by this former slave and new brother, and he asks that "whatever may be owed be charged to his _____". We can hear Christ intercession as our expiator, agreeing to take our place and to have all our sins imputed to Him. Jesus is our propitiator, reconciling us to the Father.**

The story of this fugitive Colossian slave is remarkable evidence of the freedom of access to the prisoner which was granted to all, and "a beautiful illustration both of the character of St. Paul and the transfiguring power and righteous principles of the gospel."

Compiler's note: Various traditions pick up where the New Testament left off and one in the Catholic post-Aletheia, finds Onesimus as the bishop of Ephesus, having been ordained by the apostles. However, his newfound Christian faith brought him under fire, and he was arrested in Rome and sentenced to death after preaching about the beauty of celibacy. He was cruelly tortured and then beaten to death.

Philemon 19; I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self.

- **Paul is reminding Philemon that it was his interaction in participation with God's Holy Spirit that was responsible for Philemon's salvation and in that debt of full forgiveness from Christ, shouldn't he likewise be willing to forgive Onesimus?**

Philemon 20; Yes, brother, may I have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

➤ The apostle is confident in Philemon's salvation and renewal, walking in obedience to the Lord and the new way of the Spirit, poised, his heart has been _____ed, and his motivation will be unselfish forgiveness as Philemon deals with his change in relationship to the former slave, made righteous by the blood of Jesus.

It is characteristic of born-again believers to do more than is requested. Jesus asks us to go the second mile. Maybe the reason that some of us are so poor today is that we have been stingy with the Lord. The Lord is a generous Lord. We should be generous people. Jesus illustrated this attitude, which is an extreme to our old nature in Matthew 5:41 *"And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two."* And Paul capitalized on this principle in 1st Corinthians 10:31 *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory."*

Paul anticipates being let out of prison someday and in these next few verses, he expresses that anticipation in the balance of this letter. If this was the first incarnation in Rome he was released before again being imprisoned, from there he was beheaded in about '68 A.D.

Philemon 22 to 25; *"But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, and so do ²⁴ Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my coworkers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."*

➤ Since Paul expects to be released from prison, he requests prayers for that purpose and his fellow prisoners and gospel _____ that having received the propitiation of Christ are walking in the way of the Spirit. Then in verse 25, he concludes the letter with a benediction; *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen"*

It is characteristic of real believers to do more than is requested. Jesus asks us to go the second mile. Maybe the reason that some of us are so poor today is that we have been stingy with the Lord. The Lord is a generous Lord. We should be generous people. 2nd Timothy 2:24-25 *The Lord's slave [doulos {used either as involuntary or voluntary a Bondman, maid, or a Servant}] must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient,* ²⁵ *instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading [them] to the knowledge of the truth."*

Paul expects to be released from prison. He requests prayers for that purpose. Since this letter was probably written during Paul's first confinement in Rome, he was released and probably visited Philemon personally.

Biblically Based Holman Christian Standard Bible - HCSB Bullet Notes

Slave(s): The strong Greek word *doulos* cannot be accurately translated in English as servant or bond-servant; the HCSB translates this word as slave, not out of insensitivity to the legitimate concerns of modern English speakers, but out of a commitment to accurately convey the brutal reality of the Roman empire's inhumane institution as well as the ownership called for by Christ.

ⁱ McGee, J. V. (1991). [*Thru the Bible commentary: The Epistles \(1 and 2 Timothy/Titus/Philemon\)*](#) (electronic ed., Vol. 50, pp. 179–184). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

ⁱⁱ Illustrated Bible Dictionary: And Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature.

ⁱⁱⁱ McGee, J. V. (1991). [*Thru the Bible commentary: The Epistles \(1 and 2 Timothy/Titus/Philemon\)*](#) (electronic ed., Vol. 50, pp. 179–184). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

^{iv} Illustrated Bible Dictionary: And Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature