

# New Testament Epistles: Philemon

<sup>4</sup> I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, <sup>6</sup> that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

*Philemon 4-6*

*We are all God's Onesimus – Luther*

- 1. Historical Context / Occasion:** Paul's shortest letter, Philemon, is also one of the three prison epistles. But don't let its size fool you. There is a lot going on in the context and theology of this short, yet sublime epistle. There has also been a great amount of debate about where and when Paul wrote this epistle. Of his many imprisonments, three stand out: Caesarea, Ephesus, and Rome. The historic/traditional argument has been for authorship in Rome some time between 53-63 A.D.

One of the unique aspects of Philemon is that, unlike Paul's other letters, he does not spend any time revisiting or teaching any part of Christ's earthly life, ministry, and work on our behalf (i.e. as he does in Colossians or Ephesians). The main reason is that Paul presupposes that Philemon and Onesimus (the primary people involved) know the Gospel so well as to not need to revisit this. Instead, Paul goes about telling the Gospel in action by way of his request for Onesimus and his willingness to take on any debt upon himself.

This epistle has also been called brief and practical, as Paul puts the Biblical theology of reconciliation into practice with Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. One commentator observes that "reading Philemon is like arriving late for a movie, attempting to catch up with who the characters are and what has been going on in the plot, and then forced to leave the theater prematurely."<sup>1</sup>

With that in mind, we are able to piece together several parts of the story from the context of the epistle itself. Philemon was a close friend of Paul, a fellow believer in Christ, a wealthy citizen of Rome, and perhaps even a pastor in Colossae at one point (see Col. 4:17). It also appears that Paul was the instrument God used to bring Philemon (and later Onesimus) to faith in Christ. As a wealthy Roman citizen, Philemon owned slaves. In Ancient Roman society slaves were considered animated tools, and therefore property of their owner. Under Roman law masters could punish and even execute slaves who had escaped.

One of those slaves was Onesimus, who wronged Philemon in some manner (v. 18) – some have speculated thievery, but the exact nature of wrong doing is unknown. Onesimus then ran away (v. 15), and came into contact with Paul at some point. Again Paul proved to be the instrument of the Gospel for Onesimus who became a Christian, described by Paul in familial and baptismal terms in v. 10.

Paul then sent Onesimus back to Philemon (vs. 12) to be forgiven and reconciled (v.16-17) to Philemon and other members of his household and the congregation that met at his house (v. 2). Paul also makes a clever play on words with the name of Onesimus (which means useful) in v.11ff. Onesimus

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<sup>1</sup> John Nordling. *Philemon*. Concordia Commentary Series. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004. P. 1

had proved un-useful in his escape and wrong doing, but now according to Paul, was useful again in more than his work, but as a brother in Christ and a servant of Paul while he was in prison. Onesimus is now, that he has come to faith in Christ, more useful than a mere slave, but as a fellow brother in Christ. Part of Paul's intent may also have been to encourage Philemon in the full manumission of Onesimus (v. 21).

## 2. A Few Words on Slavery in the New Testament / 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome<sup>2</sup>

- a. It is hard for people who live in a modern age, particularly in the U.S., to view the issue of slavery in the New Testament / ancient Greco-Roman apart from antebellum slavery in the history of Colonial America / the United States.
- b. It also calls for us as readers of Philemon and the NT, to be repentant of our own sin and the vileness of man's inhumanity to one another, rather than self-righteous indignation.
- c. Slavery in the ancient world was complicated and complex. There were several kinds or types of slavery in the ancient Greco Roman world that were both destructive and yet also constructive to society.
- d. The NT presents the issue of slavery as a vocation in which many Christians may in fact find themselves in, and where they could honorably serve God, their masters, and society.
- e. And yet, the ancient Roman view of slavery – which viewed slaves as an animated tool and a piece of property, and a fate close to death – was a stark contrast to the biblical view that God created man and woman in his own image and affirmed his value of humanity by sending Jesus in the flesh to save us.
- f. Also, slavery in Roman society had little to do with race. Slavery was independent of race / class
- g. A two-fold generalization may help guide us through this issue:
  - i. On one hand, slaves who were lazy, disobedient, disrespectful or who otherwise did not live up to their master's trust (as evidenced in many of the Gospel parables in the NT) usually had to endure stormy and unhappy relationships with their respective masters.
  - ii. On the other hand, slaves who did their best for the master and his interests and were hard working, honest, and resourceful, usually found themselves on the master's good side, appreciated his rewards, and could enjoy an astonishing amount of responsibility, independence and autonomy – even as a slave. (in many cases, slaves often owned property of their own, as well as other slaves; were responsible for highly sensitive and vital financial transactions for their masters – like a modern day CPA for example; they also enjoyed many of the same rights and privileges in Roman society as free born citizens, such as the right to assemble in public worship for a god or goddess of their choosing).
- h. On the whole, the NT view of the relationship of slaves and masters and between Christians and persons of greater or lesser station in the world (what Luther articulates in the doctrine of vocation) is similar. For example, when we read instructions to slaves and masters in the NT, try substituting employees and bosses respectively and there exists a similar relationship as obtained long ago in the assemblies of congregations in the NT (see Eph. 6:5-7; Col. 3:22-25).

**3. Date:** Some time between A.D. 53-63, most likely during the time of his first imprisonment in Rome.

**4. Author:** Paul, the apostle.

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<sup>2</sup> This list of bullet points is compiled from the following: John Nordling. *Philemon*. Concordia Commentary Series. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004. P. 42-139.

5. **Primary Theme:** Through the reconciliation that is ours in Christ, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of our earthly / temporal vocations.
6. **Purpose(s):**
  - a. To accompany Onesimus whom Paul returned to Philemon together with Tychicus (12)
  - b. To plead with Philemon to treat Onesimus well (10) and to offer to pay for the loss of Onesimus (18-19)
7. **Theological Themes:**
  - a. Christian love (4-8)
  - b. The ‘brotherhood’ of all Christians (1, 7, 16, 20)
  - c. Forgiveness / Reconciliation. See also 2 Cor. 5:19
  - d. Slavery/Freedom in Christ
  - e. Paul as a type of Christ in Philemon
  - f. The Church as the family of God
  - g. Koinonia / fellowship in the faith (6, 17-19). See also Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:25-29.
8. **Structure / Outline:**
  - a. Greeting: 1-3
  - b. Thanksgiving for Philemon’s faith and love: 4-7
  - c. Paul’s case on behalf of Onesimus: 8-20
  - d. Concluding remarks: 21-25
9. **Key Passages:**
  - a. 4-7
  - b. 8-16
  - c. 18-20
10. **Luther on Philemon:**

*“This epistle gives us a masterful and tender illustration of Christian love. For here we see how St. Paul takes the part of poor Onesimus and, to the best of his ability, advocates his cause with his master. He acts exactly as if he were himself Onesimus, who had done wrong. Yet he does this not with force or compulsion, as lay within his rights; but he empties himself of his rights in order to compel Philemon also to waive his rights. What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus’s if we believe.”*

11. **Liturgical Use:**
  - a. Proper 18 C