

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Letter of Paul to Philemon – Part 1

I. Introduction: Today we're going to begin a study through the letter of Paul to Philemon. This is one of, if not the most, untaught epistle in the New Testament. The letter, however, has a very important message for the church today. In fact, there is evidence that, though many have thought otherwise, this letter wasn't just written to one man, Philemon, but to the church in his house (**cf. verses 1-2**). This is one of four of what are commonly referred to as "**Prison Epistles**." The other three are Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. These are letters written by Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome under house arrest for two years (**Acts 28:17-31**). This places the date of this writing somewhere between AD 60 – 62.

II. Who was Philemon?

A. Philemon is believed to have been a wealthy Colossian who apparently was a friend of Paul's and came to Christ under Paul's ministry (**cf. verse 19**). Paul speaks of him as being, not only a friend, but also a "**fellow laborer**" and one who had a church (congregation) which met in his house (**verse 2**). He was also a man who owned slaves as most of the wealthy of his day did. Some scholars estimate that as many as one third of the population of Rome were slaves.¹

B. Some facts about slavery during Biblical times:

1. Here in America, slaves were taken so that their masters would have economic gain, but in ancient slavery, the primary motive for slavery was often, not always, the economic relief of the servant (**cf. Leviticus 25:35-37**).
2. it's important to understand that in our American version of slavery, people were taken into slavery against their will. They were simply kidnapped or were later born into captivity from parents that were enslaved. But in ancient slavery, the path into slavery was varied and, in many cases, voluntary. There were several types of servant/slaves in the New and Old Testament:
 - a. People who needed assistance, or who simply could not pay their debts, might turn to a voluntary form of servitude. The Bible had guidelines for this kind of voluntary subjection – (**Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12-15**).
 - b. It was not uncommon for a temporary indentured servant to want to stay in service to his or her master. It's important to note that they were not treated harshly like slaves in America often were. The Bible gives guidelines for these also, who, essentially, became part of the family (**Exodus 21:5-6; Deuteronomy 15:16-17**).
 - c. There were strict Biblical laws preventing the Israelites from holding their fellow Israelites as slaves against their will (**Deuteronomy 24:7**).

3. What about Greco/Roman slavery? For this we quote from David Pao:

"Slaves were generally divided into two types: (1) agricultural and industrial slaves, and (2) domestic slaves. The former often consisted of prisoners of wars and convicted criminals; their treatment was harsh and prospect of manumission low. Domestic slaves, however, performed a variety of functions throughout the household, and skilled laborers received considerably better treatment with the possibility of gaining upward social mobility."²

III. Who was Onesimus?

A. Onesimus was a slave of Philemon's who had escaped. His name literally means; "**one who benefits another**"; "**profitable**."³ Bernard Rossier states that Paul made a play on words with this in **verses 11 ("profitable") and 20 ("have joy")**⁴. At some point, he became a believer due to the ministry of Paul. It is uncertain how they met, but it must be that Onesimus went to see Paul for some reason while he was under house arrest in Rome.

IV. Purpose of the Letter.

A. The main purpose was to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in the Lord rather than as a runaway slave. Also to inform Philemon that Paul expected to be released soon and that he planned on visiting him.

¹ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Philemon* (<http://www.sonlight.com>: Sonic Light Publication, 2025), 1.

² David W. Pao, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Colossians & Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2012), 349.

³ *The Complete Biblical Library: Acts – Revelation, Volume 2*, (Empowered Life, Tulsa, OK, 2016.), 947.

⁴ Ibid.

B. Several scholars point out another reason for this letter. Dr. Merrill Tenney writes:

“In this letter are found all the elements of forgiveness: the offense (11, 18), compassion (10), intercession (10, 18-19), substitution (18-19), restoration to favor (15), and elevation to a new relationship (16). Every aspect of the divine forgiveness of sin is duplicated in the forgiveness that Paul sought for Onesimus. It is a practical lesson in the petition of the prayer, ‘Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.’”⁵

V. Exposition.

A. Verses 1-2 – **“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:”**

1. **“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...”** – This is the only letter where Paul opened his letter referring to himself as a **“prisoner”**, rather than an apostle. This could have been to show Philemon that he wasn’t attempting to persuade through apostolic authority but through friendship. Though Paul was a prisoner of Rome, he chose to see himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. This suggests that he may have believed he was in the will of God. He was being used of God by receiving as many as would come to him (**Acts 28:30-31**) and wrote the inspired Scriptures of **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians** and **Philemon**. **“Christ”** means; **“anointed; the Anointed One”⁶** and **“Jesus”** means; **“YHWH saves,”** or **“salvation is of YHWH”⁷**, so **“Christ Jesus”** means **“Anointed Jehovah Who Saves or, brings Salvation.”** Dr. Bob Utley writes concerning the word **“Christ”**:

“It implied ‘one called and equipped by God for a specific task.’ In the OT three groups of leaders: priests, kings, and prophets, were anointed. Jesus fulfilled all three of these anointed offices (cf. Heb. 1:2–3).”⁸

2. **“...and Timothy our brother...”** - **“Timothy”** was a resident of Lystra, a city in the province of Galatia (**Acts 16:1-3**). He was the son of a Greek father (**Acts 16:1**) and a Jewish mother named Eunice (**II Timothy 1:5**). As a child he had learned the Scriptures from his mother and grandmother (**II Timothy 1:5; 3:15**). Timothy was a trusted companion and associate of Paul, and he accompanied Paul on many of his missionary journeys. Paul referred to him as a **“son in the faith” (I Timothy 1:2)**. Most scholars agree that Timothy was not involved with the content of the letter but was with Paul and was included in the greeting. It’s also possible that he was Paul’s scribe who wrote what Paul dictated. This also showed Philemon and the church that Timothy, a church leader, was in agreement with what Paul wrote.
3. **“To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer...”** – Paul begins by addressing Philemon in a very affectionate way, calling him is much loved friend. **“Fellow laborer”** indicates, as previously mentioned, that Philemon was very much involved with getting the Gospel to people. If this is the case, it would be presumed that he would rejoice to discover that his runaway slave, Onesimus had received the Lord.
4. **“...to the beloved Apphia...”** – Many scholars believe that this was very possibly Philemon’s wife. Dr. Thomas Constable writes:

“Apphia was evidently a family member, probably Philemon's wife. Paul may have addressed her specifically because normally the wife had the day-to-day responsibility for the household slaves.”⁹

5. **“...Archippus our fellow soldier...”** – Some believe that Archippus may have been Philemon’s and Apphia’s son. Of course, this can’t be substantiated. The phrase **“fellow soldier”** illustrates that the Christian life is a life involving a battle (**cf. II Timothy 2:1-4; Ephesians 6:12-17**). Again, Dr. Constable asserts:

“Archippus may have been their son, or perhaps Philemon's physical brother, or his friend. He seems to have been old enough to have been responsible for some kind of ministry (Col. 4:17). He may have been the leading man in the church that met in Philemon's house.”¹⁰

6. **“...and to the church in your house:”** – In the early church, it was common for believers to assemble in the homes of wealthy Christians for worship and the ministry of the Word. (**cf. Romans 16:3-5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15;**

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey, Revised*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1985), 319.

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1312.

⁷ Robert James Utley, *Paul Bound, the Gospel Unbound: Letters from Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philippians)*, vol. Volume 8, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 1997), 148.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Constable, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.