

Philemon

Forgiveness

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Introduction

- **Philemon** is one of Paul's Prison Epistles, along with **Ephesians, Philippians** and **Colossians**.
- These letters come from the time of Paul's house imprisonment in Rome, which we see at the end of **Acts**.
- **Philemon** appears to be the host of a church in **Colosse**, with his son being, perhaps, the leader of the group.
- This church was likely planted during the several years that Paul spent ministering in **Ephesus**.
- It is a highly personal letter. Dealing with one main topic, that **Philemon would receive back Onesimus**, his slave.

From
Colossians 1

From
Colossians 4

Background

Colossians 1:3-8

Paul and the Colossians

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 **just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf** 8 **and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.**

Paul and the Colossians

- Paul wrote to the Colossian church but it seems that he did not personally plant the church.
- He may have written to them at the request of **Epaphras**, who was currently in Rome with Paul.
- He taught them "the word of truth, the gospel."

- Further, **Colossians 2:1** says,

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,

Colossians 1:3-8

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Colossians 4:7-9, 12-13, 17

7 **Tychicus**, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me ...

9 with **Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.** They will make known to you all things which are happening here ...

12 **Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ**, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

17 And say to **Archippus**, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

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From Tony
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- **Onesimus** was the slave of **Philemon**, the host of a house church in **Colosse**.
- Evidently he left Colosse, perhaps running away, and made his way to **Rome**.
- It is also possible that he stole from Philemon before leaving.

- While in Rome, he encountered **Paul**, the prisoner, who led him to Christ and helped him grow.
- Paul is now sending him back home as one of his messengers to Colosse.

Here we see a very tender side of Paul as he pleads with his friend Philemon to forgive and reconcile with Onesimus. His words are a reminder that forgiveness is prerequisite to reconciliation, and reconciliation is prerequisite to restoration. The message of Philemon is desperately needed in our day of division and strife. As believers, we need to be kingdom agents of forgiveness and reconciliation in each other's lives and in the world.



Tony Evans, Bible Teacher
and Commentator

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- **v.1** Paul considers himself a **prisoner of Jesus** - not only of the Roman government.
- **v.2** In addition to Philemon, Paul mentions **Apphia**, who is likely Philemon's wife.
- **Archippus** is likely the leader (elder, pastor) of the house church and possibly the son of **Philemon and Apphia**.
- The letter is also to **the church** - a public letter.
- The whole church would have already known the situation - and known the slave Onesimus.
- There were likely other slaves and slaveholders in the church so this would be highly relevant to them.

From Chuck
Smith

Paul's
Opinion of
Philemon



Chuck Smith (1927-2013),
founding pastor of the
Calvary Chapel Movement

Paul ... was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. It was his love for Jesus that had placed him in bondage ... It makes such a difference in how you regard your chains and limitations.

If you are a prisoner of Rome then you can sit there in your cell and sulk. But if a prisoner of Jesus, you rejoice! I'm a prisoner of Jesus! I'm bound by Him!



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From
1 John 4

- Paul clearly thinks highly of Philemon.
- It's not like he was prone to flattering others with excessive compliments.
- Philemon (*meaning "affectionate"*) clearly knew how to love his fellow saints.

1 Thessalonians 2:5

For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.

- But in relation to Philemon, this proverb is applicable.

Proverbs 22:1

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

From 1 John 4

1 John 4:7-8 7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:11-12 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:20-21 20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

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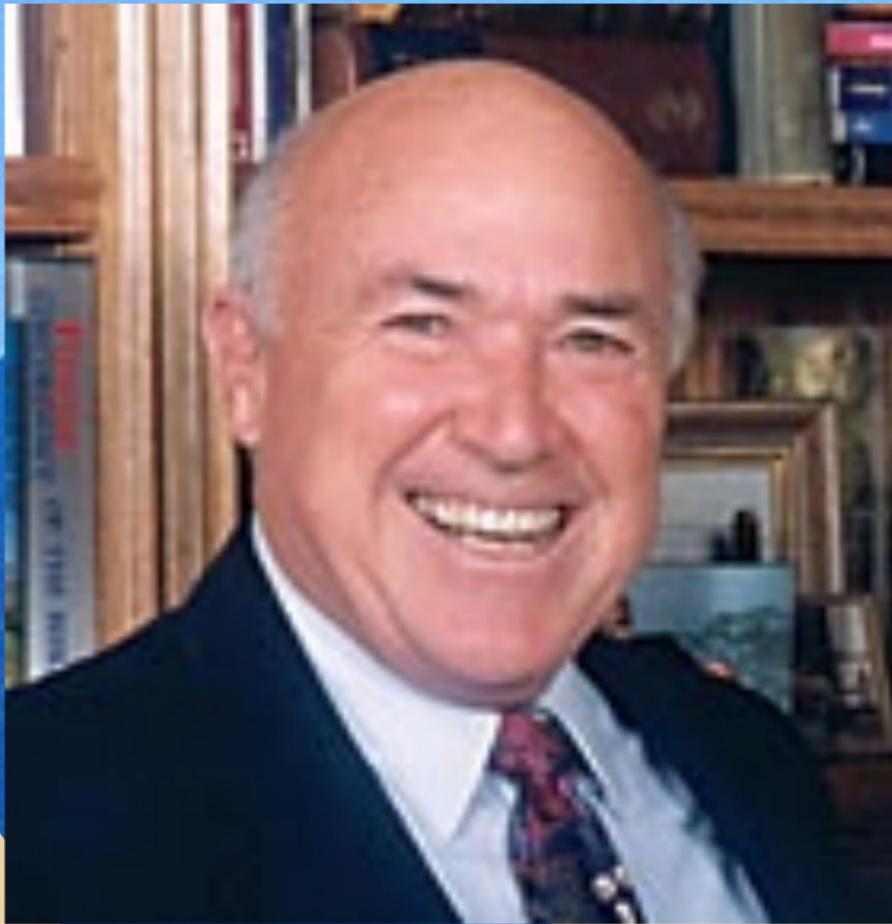
Regarding Onesimus 8-20

- **vv. 8-9** Paul doesn't use his apostolic authority to coerce Philemon.
- He wanted Philemon's response to come from the heart.
- **vv. 10-11** While in Rome, Paul led Onesimus to Christ.
- **vv. 12-16** Rather than keep Onesimus in Rome as a helper, Paul sends him home to Philemon.
- **vv. 17-20** Here Paul makes his request. He would like to see Philemon receive Onesimus as a brother, not merely a slave - especially not one who wronged him.

From Chuck
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The Faith
of Onesimus

Paul's
Request



Chuck Smith (1927-2013),
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Calvary Chapel Movement

Paul could have given a bold command to Philemon, appealing to his Apostolic Authority. But he didn't do that. Instead, he appealed "for love's sake" begging him to do the right thing for love ...

Godly leaders will always do that. Leaders who flex their muscles and intimidate people only show their lack of Christlikeness.



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From
Galatians

- We really do not know how **Onesimus** found his way to **Paul**, or whether it was intentional or not.
- Nonetheless, God used these circumstances to lead the escaped slave not only to **Paul**, but to **Jesus**.
- **v. 10** Paul sees theirs as a genuine father-child relationship.
- He uses the same terminology with **Timothy** and **Titus**, but interestingly, not with **Philemon**.
- **v.11** The name **Onesimus** means "useful, beneficial, profitable," so now he is living up to his name.

From Galatians

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 4:6-7

6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

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Paul's Request

- Onesimus, as a slave who committed a crime, had no real rights under Roman law. It was common in such cases for the slave to be treated brutally.
- Yet Paul is willing to cover Onesimus's debt - as Jesus did for us.
- When Paul says, "I want some *benefit* from you in the Lord, he uses a word related to the name *Onesimus*."
- It seems Paul wants Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus, but possibly to free him and allow him to work with Paul.
- This would be one way Philemon could "refresh Paul's heart."

Slavery in
Ancient
Rome

Paul and
Slavery

Slavery in Ancient Rome

In Rome and Italy, in the four centuries between 200 BC and 200 AD, perhaps a quarter or even a third of the population was made up of slaves ...

Their role was to provide labour, or to add to their owners' social standing as visible symbols of wealth, or both. Some slaves were treated well, but there were few restraints on their owners' powers, and physical punishment and sexual abuse were common. ... By definition slavery was a brutal, violent and dehumanising institution, where slaves were seen as akin to animals.

from https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/slavery_01.shtml

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Paul and Slavery

1 Corinthians
7:21-23

- Sometimes Paul (or even the Bible) comes under criticism for accepting slavery. This might be at least a little unfair.
- The Roman Empire experienced three massive slave rebellions in the two centuries before Christ.
- The third was led by Spartacus.
- All three ended in failure despite the fact that many slaves were former soldiers and prisoners of war.
- Paul undermines the institution, not by encouraging rebellion, but by teaching the equality slaves and masters.

1 Corinthians 7:21-23

21 Were you a bondservant [or *slave*] when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22 For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.

It's helpful to remind ourselves that we were bought with the blood of Christ - so we belong to him!

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Closing 21-25

- **vv. 21-22** It would have been very hard for Philemon to resist Paul's logic regarding the right attitude toward Onesimus.
- To top it off, Paul expresses confidence that he will be released from this imprisonment - and it seems that was correct.
- It is unclear if **Epaphras**, the former pastor in Colosse was actually a prisoner with Paul - or simply helping Paul in his ministry.
- In **Colossians** Paul calls him both a "fellow slave" and "slave of Christ."
- **Mark** and **Luke** are the authors of those two Gospels.
- **v.25** The letter ends with **Grace**.

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- Legally, **Philemon** was under no obligation to forgive **Onesimus** and receive him back.
- Still less would he have been required to free him and let him work with **Paul**.
- Instead he could have punished him severely.

- Yet in this letter, Paul artistically crafts a convincing request to the slaveholder about the slave.
- It is a skillful reminder that we have each been forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents when others may owe us 100 denarii.
 - See the parable in Matthew **18:23-35**.

From Tony
Evans

Epilogue

A Final
Prayer

Everything changes when a person places faith in Christ. When a person comes to Jesus, he has a new status. When people enter the family of God, their relationships change. The question addressed in this passage is this: how do you relate to a person who has wronged you based on his new status with Jesus Christ?



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- About 50 years after this, the church father **Ignatius** wrote a letter to the church in **Ephesus**.
- He wrote it in captivity, while passing through Ephesus on his way **from Syria to Rome**, where he was martyred.
- In his greeting, he writes the following,

I received, therefore, your whole multitude in the name of God, through Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, and your bishop in the flesh, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. And blessed be He who has granted unto you, being worthy, to obtain such an excellent bishop.

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A Final Prayer

Dear Father in heaven,

- We know that you have forgiven us more than we could ever repay.
- Help us to be forgiving people, and in that way follow your perfect example.
- Christ taught us to pray "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," which implies that we need to always be people who are ready to forgive.
- And once more we pray that you would wash away our sins.
- In Christ,
- Amen.

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