



A Little Letter with a Big Message

Lesson 2 • Overview of Philemon

What Is the Big Message of This Little Letter?

1. **BACKGROUND** of the Letter to Philemon.

- The local **CHURCH** at Colossae.

The city of Colossae was a little place and insignificant in the big schemes of things. And the church in Philemon's home was likely little too, appearing to be equally insignificant.

1. **PLANTED** by Epaphras.

Epaphras along with Philemon were led to Christ by Paul. Most likely this occurred during his nearly three-year ministry at Ephesus on his 3rd Missionary Journey. Acts 19:1-41; 20:17-38

- Epaphras was a resident of Colossae who *went back, proclaimed the gospel* to his people, and *planted* the church there. (Colossians 1:6-8; 4:12)
- Epaphras had *multiplied* himself: He originally was *sent to Colossae* as Paul's representative but was now *sent back to Paul* as the Colossians' representative! (Philemon 23; Colossians 1:6-7; 4:12-13)
- Epaphras was established in the four goals of discipleship and the "Ministry Epistles":
 - "Our beloved fellow bond-servant" Colossians 1:7
 - "A faithful servant of Christ" Colossians 1:7
 - "A bondservant of Christ Jesus" Colossians 4:12
 - "My fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" Philemon 23



2. **GATHERED** in the home of Philemon and perhaps his wife, Apphia.

- Philemon's **CONVERSION** was likely through Paul during his Ephesian ministry. (v. 19)
- Philemon's **WEALTH** enabled him to own a home large enough for the church to meet and own at least one household slave named Onesimus. (vv. 1-2)

Perhaps Epaphras and Philemon were *business partners* who were in Ephesus on business when they met Paul and trusted in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. When they returned to Colossae...

Epaphras **PROCLAIMED** the gospel and Philemon **PROVIDED** the house for the church!

- Philemon's **FAMILY** may include Apphia and Archippus. (v. 2)

3. **PASTORED** by Archippus, the son of Philemon and Apphia?

- Paul describes Archippus as a fellow **SOLDIER** in ministry. (v. 2)
- Paul challenges Archippus to **FULFILL** his ministry. (Colossians 4:17)

- The Family **CONFLICT** between Philemon and his household slave, Onesimus.
 1. Onesimus the **RUNAWAY**: *Has repented, needs to return, and be reconciled with Philemon. (vv. 10-11, 17-19)*
 2. Philemon the **REFRESHER**: *Needs to reconcile with Onesimus, receive him as a brother, and release him. (vv. 4-7, 12-17)*
 3. Paul the **RECONCILER**: *Willing to make restitution, wants to be refreshed, and receive Onesimus back. (vv. 8-20)*

*If Paul's two converts would **BREAKTHROUGH** to real fellowship,
it would **REFRESH** his heart, their hearts, and the hearts of the entire church!*

2. **BIG IDEA** of the Letter to Philemon.

*Real fellowship in Christ **BREAKS** through barriers to **REFRESHING** relationships with one another.*

3. **BREAKDOWN** of the Letter to Philemon.

Paul's Greeting to Philemon and the Church (1-3)

A PRAYER for Philemon to Experience Real Fellowship and Refreshment. (4-7)

A PLEA for Onesimus to Receive Real Forgiveness and Reconciliation. (8-17)

A PROMISE by Paul to Encourage Real Followers and Refreshers. (18-21)

Paul's Farewell to Philemon and the Church (22-25)

In God's Big Story There Are No Little People or Little Places!

"The Scripture emphasizes that much can come from little if the little is truly consecrated to God. There are no little people and no big people in the true spiritual sense, but only consecrated and unconsecrated people. The problem for each of us is applying this to ourselves...But if a Christian is consecrated, does this mean he will be in a big place instead of a little place? The answer, the next step, is very important: as there are no little people in God's sight, so there are no little places. To be wholly committed to God in the place where God wants him— this is the creature glorified."

"We must remember throughout our lives that in God's sight there are no little people and no little places. Only one thing is important: to be consecrated persons in God's place for us, at each moment. Those who think of themselves as little people in little places, if committed to Christ and living under His Lordship in the whole of life, may, by God's grace, change the flow of our generation."

"No Little People," The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer

Five Reasons Why Paul Wrote His Letter to Philemon

1. The Report of Epaphras: *Called for the writing and sending of the Letter to the Colossians with Tychius.*

- The church in Colossae is five to six years old and is at the crossroads of a spiritual crisis.
- The crisis caused deep concern on the part of Paul and Epaphras. *Colossians 2:1-3; 4:12-13*
- The correspondence to Colossae is a challenge to keep finding fulfillment in their **relationship** with Christ alone, the Head of the Body, the church.

2. The Return of Onesimus: *Called for the writing and sending of the Letter to Philemon with Tychius. Philemon 21*

- Paul's confidence in the obedience of both Onesimus and Philemon in Christ makes the letter possible. *Philemon 11, 13, 21*
 - 1) Onesimus, a household slave of Philemon, had wronged and possibly robbed his master, then **ran away**. (*vv. 15-16*)
 - 2) Onesimus flees to Rome and providentially meets Paul in prison to be **redeemed** by faith and repentance in Christ. (*v. 10*).
 - 3) Onesimus had **repented toward** His heavenly Master but had **not yet made restitution** to his earthly master, Philemon.
 - Repentance** is a change of mind that leads to a change of life. (*vv. 11, 13*)
 - Restitution** is to make right what was done wrong; it is the fruit of repentance. (*vv. 12, 18-19*)
 - 4) Philemon now needs to **reconcile** with Onesimus by forgiving him and receiving him as a beloved brother in the Lord. (*vv. 17-19*)
 - 5) Paul's ultimate desire was that Philemon would **release** Onesimus of his service to Philemon, so he could **return** to Paul's service for the Lord. (*vv. 13-14, 21*)

"Roman law...practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave... Slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offences than his. A thief and a runaway, he had no claim to forgiveness." -J. B. Lightfoot
- Philemon's voluntary forgiveness, acceptance, and return of Onesimus will put the "**Ministry Epistles**" in action:
 - 1) The Reason: Onesimus' new **Growing Relationship with Christ**. (*vv. 10-12; Col 4:9*)
 - 2) The Need: Onesimus' **Real Fellowship with other believers**. (*vv. 4-7, 15-17, 20-21; Col 4:9*)
 - 3) The Goal: Onesimus' **Outstanding Membership in the local church**. (*v. 2; Col 4:9*)
 - 4) The Purpose: Onesimus' **Whole-hearted Partnership in the work of the ministry**. (*vv. 11-13, 17; Col 4:9*)

3. The Release of Paul: *Called for the hope of hospitality. Philemon 22*

- Paul's hope was for a soon release and to visit the Colossian congregation in person for the first time! (*v. 22; Colossians 2:1*)
- Paul probably wants to stay where he can exert the greatest influence on the small church. (*vv. 1-2*)
- Paul is also providing personal accountability for Philemon and Onesimus by staying in Philemon's home, since he would observe firsthand and be refreshed by the fellowship between master and slave in the home and in the church services!

4. The Relationship of Masters and Slaves in General: *Called for the obedient example of Philemon.*

- Philemon will model personal application of the principles set forth in the *extended teaching* on master/slave relationships found in *Colossians 3:22-4:1*.
- Onesimus was one of millions of slaves in the Roman Empire (over 1/2 of the population by some estimates!).
- Philemon was one of several believers who owned slaves in the church and, therefore, would be a very visible and influential model of **how fellowship should function in the local church**.

"The manner in which Paul treats the problem of Onesimus indicates the way in which Christianity grappled with the evils of human society. To have directly antagonized the institution of human slavery would have precipitated an immediate conflict between Rome and Christianity, would have stigmatized Christianity as being anti-social, and would have turned all the powers of the Empire against it in an effort to crush such teachings. Instead of making a frontal attack upon the institution of slavery, Christianity inculcated a spirit of love and consideration which ultimately meant the death-knell of that institution." - D. Edmond Hiebert (An Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. 2, 248-249)

For more on Paul's approach to slavery see D. Edmond Hiebert, *In Paul's Shadow: Friends and Foes of the Great Apostle*, (1992), 191-92.

5. The Refreshment of Others by Philemon: *Called for Philemon to forgive and breakthrough to real fellowship.*

- Paul was thankful for Philemon's **maturity** like the rest of the Colossian disciples. *Philemon 4, Colossians 1:3-4*
 - 1) He knew Philemon was one of the **set-apart, faithful brethren** in Christ at Colossae. (*Philemon 1, 4-5, 7, 20-21-22; Col 1:2, 3-8*)
 - 2) He had heard of Philemon's **faith** toward the Lord Jesus. (*Philemon 4; cf. Colossians 1:4*)
 - 3) He had heard of Philemon's **love** toward all the saints. (*Philemon 4; cf. Colossians 1:4*)

"His character, as shadowed forth in this Epistle, is one of the noblest which the sacred record makes known to us. He was full of faith and good works, was confiding, obedient, sympathizing, benevolent, and a man who, on a question of simple justice, needed only a hint of his duty to prompt him to go even beyond it." - Horatio B. Hackett, quoted by D Edmund Hiebert (Introduction, 241)
- Paul was refreshed by Philemon's **ministry** to the saints through the local church.

Philemon was established in the four goals of discipleship and the "**Ministry Epistles**": **Growing Relationship**, **Real Fellowship**, **Outstanding Membership**, and the **Whole-hearted Partnership in the Ministry**.

"our beloved" Philemon was a believer who was "**beloved**" by God's people due to God's electing love. (*v. 1*)

"a beloved brother" Philemon is acknowledged as a "**brother**" (*vv. 7, 16, 20*) in the **fellowship of God's family**, who had refreshed the hearts of the saints, brining much joyful comfort to Paul as well. (*v. 7; cf. Col 1:8*).

"the church in your home" Philemon was not only an outstanding member in the church but opened his heart and home to the church. (*v. 3*)

"and fellow worker" Paul's most common designation for his **colleagues in ministry**. It was not used of believers in general but **those who ministered with him to other believers**. The term emphasizes the **function** of ministry not what **position** one held in the church. (*v. 1*)
- Paul was confident in light of Philemon's obedience to the Lord (*v. 21*) and love for his spiritual father (*vv. 9, 19, 22*) that he would breakthrough a lack of forgiveness toward Onesimus and refresh the hearts of Onesimus, Paul, and all the saints in the churches!

The Cities Related to the Letters of Colossians and Philemon: Tracing the Possible Travels of Paul, Epaphras, Philemon, and Onesimus

1. Paul arrives in Ephesus on his third missionary journey and teaches for over two-years in Hall of Tyrannus.
2. Epaphras and Philemon, together or separately, arrive in Ephesus most likely to conduct business in this urban center, which was near their smaller and less significant city of Colossae.
3. Eventually both Epaphras and Philemon encounter Paul during his time in Ephesus and are led to repent and trust the Lord Jesus Christ.
4. Epaphras, having been established to **G.R.O.W.** as a disciple, returns to Colossae as Paul's representative and proclaims the gospel to his city and the message spreads to the surrounding cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul had never personally traveled to this area yet. (It's possible that Epaphras led Philemon to Christ during this time, but it sounds like Paul himself led Philemon to Christ.)
5. Philemon, having also been established to **G.R.O.W.** as a disciple, returns to Colossae and opens his heart and home to the newly planted church. The church and likely his own household includes Apphia and Archippus. It's possible that Archippus was a pastor of the church. Whether they are Philemon's wife and son we can't know for certain, but we do know Philemon had a slave by the name of Onesimus.



6. Eventually Onesimus runs away from his master, Philemon, and possibly steals from him to fund his escape. At a minimum Onesimus' absence would cost Philemon financially,
 7. Onesimus likely flees to Rome in order to lose himself in the masses of people, including other runaway slaves like himself. By this time Paul is now in Rome under house arrest but can receive guests.
 8. In God's providence Onesimus encounters Paul during his house arrest in Rome. We don't know if Onesimus ran into one of Paul's fellow workers in Rome or if he heard his master speak of Paul in his home where the church met and Onesimus served. However it happened, Onesimus encounters Paul in chains and is led to repent and trust Jesus Christ as his new Master!
 9. Onesimus, whose common slave name means "Profitable" or "Useful," is transformed by Christ and quickly becomes "useful" to Paul in his imprisonment. He is a "faithful and beloved brother" to Paul and his fellow workers in Rome.
 10. Paul wants to keep Onesimus in Rome, because he is so "useful" to the furtherance of the gospel in Paul's imprisonment. But Paul knows Onesimus has truly repented and wants to return to makes things right with his master, Philemon. His wants to be reconciled and received as his brother in Christ. Onesimus is also ready to make restitution for what he has cost his master or stolen from him.
 11. The opportunity to safely send Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae is the result of a crisis in the Colossian church. Paul learns of this crisis when the church sends Epaphras back to Paul in Rome in order to minister to him during his imprisonment. Epaphras may have ended up being arrested for helping Paul or more likely he is willing to freely suffer with Paul as his "fellow prisoner" to minister to him on behalf of the grateful Colossian church that meets in Philemon's home.
 12. Paul writes his letter to the Colossian church in order to challenge them to keep *growing in their relationship with Christ alone*, the Head of the Body, the church. He sends the letter with "Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord." But Paul also sends Onesimus back with Tychicus as a fellow believer and *they together* will inform the Colossian church of Paul's ministry in prison. Remember, the church meets in the home of his former master.
 13. Paul also sends along little letter to Philemon in which he pleads with Philemon to *break through to real fellowship* with Onesimus who formerly was his "useless" slave but is now his brother in Christ Perhaps, Onesimus himself handed him this letter? In any case, both the letter to the Colossians (with its extended teaching on master and slaves) and the letter to Philemon were read in the church that met in Philemon's home! Talk about accountability!
- Plus, Paul sends a letter to the church at Ephesus and their surrounding churches regarding *outstanding membership* in the local church. Plus, he sends a letter to the church in Laodicea and the Colossians and Laodiceans are to read each other's mail!
14. Paul's hope is that Philemon will forgive Onesimus and "receive him into his fellowship as a beloved brother and into the membership of the church at Colossae. If restitution is required, Paul is ready to pay it himself on Onesimus' behalf. Paul has sent his "very heart" to Philemon and hopes that he will receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself. Consequently, Paul's own heart will be refreshed by Philemon's *real fellowship* with Onesimus as would the Colossian church that meets in his home!
 14. Paul's ultimate hope is that Philemon will set Onesimus free and send him back to Paul in Rome, so he can continue to be "useful" to Paul in the work of the ministry. Onesimus has been established in *whole-hearted partnership in the work of the ministry* with Paul just like Epaphras and Philemon.
 16. Finally, Paul hopes to be released soon and plans to finally visit the Colossian church in person and asks to stay in Philemon's home! Remember, his home is where Onesimus serves as his slave and where the church meets for worship on the Lord's Day! What a picture of *real fellowship with other believers!*

"and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." Philemon 6-7