

## **Philemon**

### **Part One**

*Philemon 1-25*

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## Philemon Part One<sup>1</sup>

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources: "The Book of Philemon," *Ministry Pass*, <https://app.ministrypass.com/products/series-the-book-of-philemon-reconciliation-in-christ>

*Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press, KC, 2019

*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, The Daily Study Bible Series, Sain Andrew Press, 1975

*1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis, IN, 2004

*The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Romans – Philemon*, Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI 1966

*Faithlife Study Bible*, Logos Bible Software, 2012, 2016

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.

And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philemon 1-25, niv)

Slave holders in the late 1700s and 1800s in America found their proof text in Philemon that justified slavery. They were convinced by this little letter that God intended for slaves to remain slaves.

Abolitionists, on the other hand, found their evidence in the very same letter that slavery has no place in God's Kingdom. But even they didn't think this book necessarily elevated slaves to equals. Many on both sides misappropriated Scripture.

I am confident that when the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, he had *no idea* that it would be used 1700 years later as a weapon for both sides of a civil war.

But the Civil War didn't end the use and abuse of this passage of Scripture; it was misused a hundred years later in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s with claims that black people were inferior.

So what is it about these 25 verses that is so controversial? And was it really meant to be? And does it make any difference in our church and our lives today?

That's why we're taking two Sundays to do a deep dive into this powerful part of Scripture. Don't let its size fool you!

So let's start by seeing...

## **1. What's the story?**

There are a few things we don't know for sure, but can kind of sleuth together. For example, we don't know for certain where Philemon lived, but it is clear that Paul was writing from prison, and that Philemon must not have lived too far away from where Paul was imprisoned. From the places we know Paul had been put in prison, there's a good chance that Philemon lived in Colosse – the same church that Paul wrote Colossians to. So it was likely written when Paul was in prison in Ephesus for preaching the Gospel.

This is the only private letter of Paul that we know about. Paul probably wrote many private letters, but this is the only one we know of, and it made it into the Bible – so that means there's important stuff in it for us.

Just so you know, writing a letter then was not like now. It was a very expensive and painstaking process. It took a lot of money and a lot of time. Have you ever heard of a telegram? Back in the 18 and 1900s in the US, the fastest method of long-distance communication was something called a telegram. This was before telephones, so electronic signals were sent over wires using codes, that were

received and translated into words. A single ten-word telegram in 1860 would cost about \$2.70 – that’s about \$70 today. For ten words. So if you sent a telegram, you would keep your message short and clear.

The same was true for this letter; you can be sure that Paul chose his words very carefully and intentionally. And he starts doing that with his greetings. If you have your Bible with you (and I hope you do in some form or another), please open it to this letter because we’ll be going through it and you’ll want to refer to it.

The first two verses are pretty typical greetings of his day – stating who the writer is (and those with him) and who the recipient is (and those with him). Paul identifies himself as a prisoner – I already mentioned that he was writing from prison. But he says he is a “prisoner of Christ Jesus.” He could’ve easily said that he was a prisoner of Rome, or a prisoner because of persecution. But he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul is saying he isn’t a victim in any way. Paul belongs to Jesus, regardless of the circumstances he finds himself in, regardless of what other people do to him. He didn’t deny he was imprisoned – but he wasn’t a victim of anyone. He was in prison for telling people about Jesus, and prison just happened to be the current consequence of that.

So here’s a quick application for you and me: if you are a Christian, don’t be a victim of your circumstances – especially if you’ve been faithfully following Jesus. If you have, then you’ve got nothing to get worked up about. Keep following Jesus and make the best of it.

Then Paul identified the recipients of his letter, which we’ll talk about in a minute.

Then Paul gives this greeting in verse 3:

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”  
(Philemon 3)

- **Grace. Peace.** Two powerful words that sum up **the entire Gospel.**

The Greek word for grace is “charis” and it’s where we get our word “charity.” But it means way more than “good things to you,” which was a standard Greek greeting. But Paul used an alteration of it. His alteration of that greeting meant, “unmerited love and favor to you,” or “unconditional love to you.” The term “peace” was the Greek version of the Hebrew word, “shalom,” which meant way more than just “hope things are going well for you.” It meant, “wholeness,” or “completeness,” which only came at the arrival of God’s Kingdom. So in these two words, Paul is telling them the Gospel: because of God’s unconditional love for us, we can experience wholeness and fulness, because the Kingdom of God has arrived here on earth from Jesus Christ! Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

So now...

## **- Who is Philemon?**

Philemon was the host of the church in Colossae – the church met in his house. He was a wealthy gentile Christian (not a Jew) – he had a house big enough for the church to meet in, and he was wealthy enough to own slaves (more on that in a minute). He was also a very close friend to Paul (he calls him his dear friend) and was a key leader alongside Paul in the church there. He became a Christian thanks to Paul. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus their adult son who also had some kind of ministry there in the church.

The entire letter is a request from Paul to Philemon, and what Paul is asking is really big. So Paul begins right away...

## **- Setting up the “ask.”**

What Paul is about to ask Philemon to do is far more than a personal request; this one thing that Philemon can do is going to go against the grain of the ways that a wealthy man like Philemon would be expected to act. It is going to set the example for the culture of the church from now on, and is countercultural to the ways they have functioned in Roman society. What Paul is about to ask is huge. That's why the letter comes to the church, too.

Many of Paul's letters were written to churches, and were to be read to the entire church, and then circulated to other churches, too. Even though this is a letter to Philemon, it is delivered the same way – to be read publicly to the church. That's partly because Paul wants Philemon to know that if he does or doesn't do what Paul is asking, it will have implications on the entire church, so Paul wants the whole church looking in on the letter as well as Philemon's decision. But doing so also shows Paul's confidence in Philemon that he will do the right thing. This is clear in Paul's deeply personal expressions of his love and appreciation for Philemon in verses 4-7. Paul is telling Philemon (and the church) how grateful he is for him, how he prays for him and always with thankfulness, because Philemon lives out his love for the church and his growth in discipleship and introducing people to Jesus.

Do you know what it means to “butter someone up”? It means to praise someone as a way to get their help or support. You might think Paul is “buttering up” Philemon. But that would be manipulative, and Paul wouldn't do that. You'll also see next in verses 8 and 17-21 that Paul doesn't want to manipulate or coerce Philemon. Paul is being honest in his love and admiration for Philemon, and he's expressing his confidence that he'll do the right thing. In verses 8-9 Paul says he could “order” Philemon to do what he's about to ask – after all, Paul is an Apostle and would have every right to do that. Paul also has a right to order Philemon, because it was Paul who led him to faith in Christ. But Paul makes it clear that he's not doing any of those things; he is appealing to him on the basis of love. Paul is saying, “what I'm about to ask you, I'm doing it because I love you as my brother in Christ, and I'm asking you out of your love for the Lord and your love for me...”

Whatever it is that Paul is asking Philemon to do, it is big, and the reason for him to do it is based on the highest value of all: love. Love is the language and the motive of everything in God's Kingdom, and this thing Philemon needs to do is nothing short of that.

Got all that so far? I'm sure you are wondering then, what in the world is Paul going to ask Philemon to do? The answer to that comes when we find out...

### **- Who is Onesimus?**

So here is where we get to the heart of the letter. Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon, and he had somehow come to Paul in prison. Then Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ and he became a believer, and now Paul was sending Onesimus *back* to his slaver master, Philemon. That much we know for sure.

Now, there are a couple of theories about what happened and why Onesimus ended up being with Paul. Tradition tells us that Onesimus ran away from Philemon – a crime punishable by death. Roman law said that if a slave ran away, or if a slave stole from an owner, both were punishable by death. A slave running away would violate both, because by running away he “stole” property from his owner – in this case, himself.

This is possible, although there isn't much in the letter itself that strongly suggests this is what happened – that's what tradition tells us.

The other theory is that Onesimus is a slave of Philemon, but also his half-brother. In those times, it was not unusual for this to be the case. Philemon was probably the son of a wealthy man who also owned slaves. Slaves were property, so owners would often take female slaves for their own pleasure, and sometimes get them pregnant. This was very common practice. Roman law said that a child born to a slave was also the property of the slave owner. So if Philemon's dad impregnated a slave who gave birth to Onesimus, then Onesimus would be a slave – and Philemon's half-brother. When Philemon's father died, he inherited his father's property – including slaves. There are a few hints in the letter that this could be the case – Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon's brother. We don't know if he meant “brother” as in a fellow human being, or “brother” as in biological. Then Philemon became a Christian.

It's also possible that Onesimus did not run away – that Philemon sent him to help Paul, but then Paul led him to faith in Christ.

Both theories are possible – we don't really know for sure – but both indicate how big of a thing Paul is asking of Philemon: he is asking him to forgive Onesimus and to receive him back – no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ, and from now on to no longer treat him as a slave.

For Philemon to do this would be to flatten the entire Roman social structure within his household.

This was a really big ask.

So...

## 2. What's the point?

Well we can't read this letter without talking about the problem of the institution of slavery, and whether or not the Bible is condoning it. We can't read it without addressing it.

First, you need to know that...

### - **Slavery**

...during New Testament times was different than in our recent history. A person became a slave either because they were born into it, they were the result of a conquered nation, or they owed enormous debt to someone and so they "sold themselves" into slavery until their debt was paid. So in those times...

### - **Slavery was not race based, but it still was not good.**

It *could* have been race based, if they were a slave because they were a conquered people. But some slaves were even paid – like an indentured servant. Even so, that doesn't mean it was a good thing. Slaves were still property with few rights, and as you can guess many slave owners treated them horribly and abusively. If people do that to their own spouses and children, you can bet they'll be even more prone to do it to their slaves.

So let's look quickly at...

### - **What Paul did not, and did say**

...about slavery. Paul did not say that slave ownership was an acceptable condition. Slave holders in the American south of the 1800s claimed that by sending Onesimus back to Philemon, he was condoning slavery. That is not at all what Paul was saying. What Paul *was* saying was that Onesimus was both a brother in the human race and now a brother in Christ, and that *he should no longer be a slave*. If Philemon would change Onesimus' status, he would be making a statement that all of his slaves were no longer property. This was huge.

I told you the two theories about Onesimus – so what was he – a...

### - **Servant or brother?**

One theory is that he was a servant or a slave to Philemon, the other is that he was a half-brother and a slave to Philemon. So which was it? Paul says it was...

- (Servant or brother?) **Both!**

He was a slave; now he is a servant of Christ, now he is a brother in Christ.

The name Onesimus means “useful,” and Paul gives a play on words with his name. In verse 11 he says:

“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to me and to you.” (Philemon 11)

He’s saying, “Even though his name was ‘useful,’ he was a useless slave; now he is living up to his name as a human being and a brother in the family of God – he is useful in every way, just as every person is!” There’s an even bigger play on words: the Greek word for “useless” is “achrestos”. It sounds very much like the Greek word “achristos” – which means “without Christ.” Paul is saying that Onesimus is neither one – now he is with Christ and a useful part of God’s people, so Philemon should treat him as a brother in Christ and free him from slavery. *This is the power of the Gospel, to change the status of people into equal, meaningful members of God’s family!*

So as you can imagine, this whole thing created quite a...

- **Conflict.**

Like I said, this is a huge and dramatic statement that will have an impact on the socio-economic status of Philemon’s entire household, not to mention his place in the greater community. If Philemon does this, his neighbors and business partners will think he has lost his mind. He’s likely to lose his social standing and a lot of his business.

Here’s the key to what Paul is saying: regardless of someone’s social status, whether they are a second-class illegitimate half-brother or slave, in the Kingdom of God...

- **Spirit is always thicker than water.**

When Jesus Christ transforms a person, it doesn’t matter what their bloodline is, it doesn’t matter what they were born into, it doesn’t matter what they were or what they did or what they didn’t do. Every person in Christ is an equal to every other person in Christ. In the family of God, in the Church, there is no place for second place. There is no second class – we are all classless!

This was a big thing for Philemon to do – and it is a big thing for us to do. This is a transformational way to see the people around us – for Philemon and for us.

In fact, Paul said Philemon should forgive Onesimus for whatever he did wrong – and if he owes Philemon any money, Paul would pay it for him. If Onesimus *was* a runaway slave, this was a huge thing to do. Because listen: in the family of God – in the church – no matter how big the offense...



**- Forgiveness is always necessary.**

Not because it is a legal transaction, but because it is a relational necessity. Jesus said:

“If you do not forgive others their sins, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:15)

Paul wrote about this in his letter to the entire Church in Colossae that met in Philemon’s home:

“As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Colossians 3:13)

This was unheard of – for the Romans, it was a sign of weakness to forgive, and a person must pay the penalty for what they’d done. For the Jew, it was “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But neither of those applied in the Church – only forgiveness.

Do you see how countercultural Christianity was for the early church?

Do you see how countercultural Christianity is today?

**- Now things are different.**

You will never look eyes with another human being that is less than you. I don’t care if you see them on the sidewalk hunched over some tinfoil cooking some meth. I don’t care if you think they look like an undocumented person. I don’t care if they don’t speak your language. I don’t care if they are confused about their gender. Jesus suffered and died to make a transformed life available for every single person. No one is “useless.” Every person has the potential to be an equal in the family of God.

Listen to what Paul wrote:

In Christ “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28, niv)  
*(repeat)*

Now things are different. If you are a Christian, you and I are being called to live in a radically different relationship to each other. This is how a watching world will see that Christ is alive and real. Will they see it in this church?

Now things are different.

*Prayer. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Benediction:*

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philemon 25)*