

PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

This brief story is about three men: Paul, a prisoner in Rome; his Christian friend, Philemon, who was a master of slaves in Colosse; and Onesimus, a slave, who had probably stolen from his master and run away, ending up in Rome.

The problems were: Now that Onesimus was converted to Christ, Paul could use his help there in Rome. Onesimus, however, had a responsibility to his master, Philemon, who had the right by law to execute a rebellious slave. Now that Onesimus was a Christian, he was forgiven in God's sight;—but would Philemon agree? And what would other slaves think once they heard this story?

Paul was at the same time a true friend, a faithful witness, a mediator, and one fulfilling God's New Covenant in Christ in his righteous judgment.

As you read this book, see if your life and need do not come close to matching Onesimus' life and need? Try to figure out what conditions are needed to set you free. Also put yourself in Philemon's and Paul's position and see how God works in each life situation to mature us in Christ.

Philemon 1-3

A prisoner of Jesus Christ. In the same sense in which he elsewhere calls himself an Apostle of Christ, or a minister of Christ, he now calls himself "a prisoner of Christ;" because the chains by which he was bound on account of the gospel, were the ornaments or badges which he bore for Christ. Accordingly, he mentions them for the sake of strengthening his authority; not that he was afraid of being despised, (for Philemon undoubtedly had so great reverence and esteem for him, that there was no need of assuming any title,) but because he was about to plead the cause of a runaway slave, the principal part of which was entreaty for forgiveness.

(Calvin's Commentaries, John Calvin)

See what Paul called himself in his introduction in Romans 1:1 and Philemon 1:1. In other of his writings, he speaks of himself as an apostle. In all truth, as we lay ourselves open to the Lord Jesus Christ when we first come to Him, what is our true position? Since the Lord, only, can free us—even making us into saints—how great should be our gratitude? Can there be any room whatsoever for self-pride?

1 Cor. 6:20

1 Cor. 7:21-24

Philemon 4-7

I give thanks to my God. It deserves attention, that he at the same time prays for the very thing for which he "gives thanks." Even the most perfect, so long as they live in the world, never have so good ground for congratulation as not to need prayers, that God may grant to them, not only to persevere till the end, but likewise to make progress from day to day.

Hearing of thy love and faith. This praise, which he bestows on Philemon, includes briefly the whole perfection of a Christian man. It consists of two parts, faith in Christ, and love towards our neighbors; for to these all the actions and all the duties of our life relate. Faith is said to be in Christ, because to him it especially looks; in like manner as in no other way than through him alone can God the Father be known, and in no other than in Him can we find any of the blessings to which faith looks.

(Calvin's Commentaries, John Calvin)

Comment on Philemon's character.

Philemon 8-16

Paul is confident that he could speak freely and **be very bold in Christ**, demanding as an apostle and friend the exercise of Philemon's proper duty. A "frankness" between two believers is available **In Christ**.

Paul, the instrument God used to bring **Onesimus** to conversion during his imprisonment, appeals on behalf of his son. This is a play on words, since "Onesimus" means "Useful" or "Profitable." In stark contrast to his past, Onesimus is now useful to both Paul and Philemon. He finally lives up to his name.

Paul subtly requests that Onesimus serve him by doing what Philemon also would do if he were given the opportunity. A parallel example is that of Epaphroditus in Phil. 2:25-30. As an effective leader and good friend, Paul chooses not to force a **good deed** in violation of Philemon's own free will, but desires that service be rendered with his genuine approval. Paul suggests that God's deeper providence was at work even in Onesimus's initial act of running away. With Onesimus now belonging to Christ, there is a new and eternal relationship between slave and master.

The basis of Paul's appeal is the fact that Onesimus is now a **beloved brother**. The new relationship is beyond the temporary master-to-slave in the earthly realm to the eternal brother-to-brother in the spiritual realm. While Paul does not overtly attack the institution of slavery, the principles he espouses lay the foundation for future reformation in abolishing it.

(Spirit Filled Life Bible Philemon footnote, Bob G. Slosser)

Before you knew Christ, were you slaves to the world, the flesh and the devil? If so, describe it and tell if it was voluntary or involuntary slavery. Can this slavery still be in effect today, even though you have come to Christ as you Savior?

Rom. 8:5-13 Eph. 2:1-3

Show how there is true freedom when you are a slave of Christ, and include in your answer human feelings and desires such as worry, anxiety, fleshly desires, etc.

Rom. 8:1-4 Rom. 8:14-17 1 Cor. 7:22-24

Philemon 17-19

“If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me” (v. 17). As a strong believer following fully after his Lord, Paul’s fellowship and bonding with his friend, Philemon, gave him the unquestionable authority to make such a request, as he reassures his friend of his great love now for Onesimus prior to sending him back to his master. He then continues by telling Philemon to put any debt or wrongdoing on his (Paul’s) account.

As we see these exceptional godly traits in Paul, our hearts and minds cannot help but be directed on to that greater Friend, who made all of our sins His own on the cruel tree, paying the debt that was ours alone. Indeed we are received by God in Christ, and are accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6), having been clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We are now in the very Family of God!

Paul’s plea in behalf of the slave Onesimus before Philemon, proves to be an excellent pattern for us to follow:

- 1) He upholds Philemon’s love and faith for the Lord Jesus, and his kindness and goodness for all the saints.
- 2) Although Paul could have been commanding, rather he appeals to Philemon from his age and also as a prisoner, in the hope that Philemon would voluntarily agree to that which was now right and just for this man.
- 3) Finally, he shows Philemon that out of his forgiving and receiving Onesimus once again, there could come an even greater and richer relationship—that of brothers in the Lord. And in this relationship, they could be together forever!

What does Christ say to the Father to plead our cause?

John 17:6-19 Luke 23:34

Are we any more able to justify our cause than Onesimus was?

Rom. 3:10-18

Let there be words of praise and heartfelt thanksgiving for the unspeakable price that He paid.

Philemon 20-25

Can you see yourself as a Philemon—one who has known many privileges in the life to which he was born—no doubt wealth, prestige, recognition, and even power. Yet none of these advantages can satisfy the human heart for long; there is always the desire for more to fill the empty vacuum deep inside. In Philemon’s case, he was brought to the saving knowledge of the Lord by Paul, but his crisis would come later when he discovered his slave missing—gone. Now as a Christian, he could be experiencing a certain amount of dismay and guilt concerning his prior treatment of this man. As he receives Paul’s letter to him, would he emit anger and harshness toward Onesimus, or could he “be as one who washes the disciples’ feet” and truly forgive him—yea, even treat him as a dear brother?

To which of the three personalities and patterns (Paul, Philemon or Onesimus) would you say you are now resembling and following—no, rather, to which one would you desire to attain? The answer will undoubtedly be the name of Paul, but here we ask you carefully to discern the goal that God Himself planned for him, and all the cleansing, shaping and fire needed to produce his final productive life. May your reply be subject to prayer and the searching of the Holy Spirit!