

## *Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey*

Bible Survey Lesson 83: The Book of Philemon

### ***Introduction:***

*The letter to Philemon is the climax of a story, a story of a slave, Onesimus.*

He was not unusual, for over a third of the population in major Roman cities were slaves and another third were former slaves, representing perhaps as many as 80 million people.

Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon, a wealthy man in Colossae. One day he got his chance, stole some money, and ran away (v 18). Along with thousands of other runaways, he made his way to the big city, Rome, where he could lose himself and his past life among the throngs of people from all parts of the Empire.

One day he chanced upon some people who were going to hear an unusual man, a prisoner chained to a member of the Praetorian Guard, and living under house arrest. He heard the gospel clearly presented, as only Paul could preach it, and the Holy Spirit regenerated him, and he became a new creature in Christ (v 10).

In time, they not only became friends, but Paul grew to love Onesimus and value his help in the ministry at Rome (vv 11-13). He told Paul his story.

How strange, Paul just happened to know Onesimus' master, since he was a believer, and the church at Colossae met in his home. In fact, he was probably saved under Paul's ministry at Ephesus (v. 19).

This created a dilemma. Onesimus was a criminal, having broken Roman criminal law by running away from his lawful master, and civil law by defrauding him as well. These offenses were punishable by scourging, mutilation, or even crucifixion under Roman law. Paul knew that this issue, especially since it involved two believers, needed to be dealt with (v 14).

So, Paul wrote a personal letter to Philemon, offering to pay him back for his losses and urging him to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back as a brother in Christ (vv. 15-17). Then he sent him back to Colossae along with Tychicus who was carrying a letter for the church (Col. 4).

### ***Author and Date***

The letter to Philemon was written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians and was, therefore, one of the prison epistles written in AD. 60-61.

There is little debate about Paul's authorship, since claiming it a forgery is of no value to skeptics, and early church sources unanimously placed it in the canon.

### ***The Issue of Slavery***

Whenever the Book of Philemon is studied the issue of slavery arises. It has been used by abolitionists who felt that freedom in Christ should also mean freedom from slavery.

## *Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey*

But, it has also been used to argue for the acceptability of slavery and was a favorite Bible book of southern slave owners in America. After all, it encouraged the slave to return to his master and live in obedient harmony.

One of the most interesting aspects of the issue, to me, is the attempt to soften the picture of slavery in New Testament times by comparing it to much crueller slavery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The situation was different and in many ways better for the slave, but the fact remains that people were owned and had no ultimate identity apart from their owners.

### ***Let me try to present a balanced view of slavery in the Roman Empire.***

Slavery was wide spread in the Roman Empire with one third to one half of its 120 million people in a slave or servant relationship. It was so prevalent that it became the normal way of life, especially in the major cities. It totally eclipsed free (or paid) labor, becoming the primary "energy source" in the Greco-Roman world and a vital part of its economy.

Slavery was totally unrelated to race and the supply of slaves came from a number of sources:

1. People captured by the Roman army were either "settled" or sold.
2. Abandoned children were "rescued," raised, and sold by professional slave-owner/sellers.
3. Children born into slave families belonged to their parent's owners.
4. People were sometimes sold by the courts, or sold themselves into slavery to settle debts that could not be paid.
5. Some actually bonded themselves to masters to get a specific job.

All these factors meant that being a slave could be very bad or very good.

### ***The bad was very bad:***

1. Slaves were not legally considered persons, but, as Aristotle put it, "human tools" to be owned and used much as animals were.
2. Since they were "property" rather than "people" they could be bought, sold, traded, exchanged, inherited, and seized for payment of debts.
3. Under Roman law, masters had the ultimate right of punishment, including the power of life and death, over their slaves. This meant abuse and brutality were common and death was frequent.
4. Run-away slaves were subject to arrest, torture, and death.

### ***The good distinguished it from much ancient and modern slavery:***

1. Slaves were valuable property. A productive slave could bring a price that was equal to nine times a years wage of a freeman laborer.

## *Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey*

2. Slaves were employed in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, mining, entertainment, clerical, government, and household jobs.

Many were trained in the trade or profession of their master, and so became: teachers, librarians, musicians, artists, accountants, cooks, and even doctors or stewards who controlled all of their masters business and personal wealth. (Parables) Family friendships often developed.

3. Many owners realized that contented and educated slaves were more valuable and productive so they had them educated, allowed them to marry and have families, meet in social groups, and even allowed some to have personal money and their own property.

Since slaves had their food and housing supplied, they were often better off than free men who were uneducated, lived in poverty, paid exorbitant taxes, and had to serve in the military.

4. Slaves were often given, or able to buy freedom after a prescribed period of service and most were free upon the death of their masters.

Philemon was not the only slave holder in the church at Colossae (4:1), so this letter which was personally sent to Philemon also gave guidelines for other Christian masters in relation to their slave-brothers. Paul did not dispute the legal rights of Philemon over Onesimus, but asked that he relate the principle of Christian brotherhood to the situation.

Paul wrote about slaves and masters quite often: i.e. 1 Cor. 7; Gal 3; Eph. 6; Col. 3 and 4; 1 Tim. 6, and he always seemed to accept slavery as a reality in the Roman Empire. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament is slavery challenged. Early Christians never mounted an open attack against slavery. This was one of the problems in the American civil rights movement.

*John MacArthur makes a valid point in his notes on Philemon. " . . . had it done so, the resulting slave insurrection would have been brutally suppressed and the message of the gospel hopelessly confused with that of social reform."*

Instead, as in other areas of social evil, such as the subjection of women and children, the church undermined the evil by changing the hearts of the people involved. They focused on the message of the gospel and let the expression of Christian love turn masters and slaves from enemies into brothers and sisters.

It is clear from the New Testament that slaves were members of the church. Both Christian slaves and masters are told their relationship must be controlled by their common relationship with Christ. Philemon was instructed to receive his runaway slave Onesimus as a "beloved brother" that elevates him, from a non-person to the status of an equal person.

By stressing the spiritual oneness (equality) of individuals the Bible does away with many personal and public social abuses. Just look at the miracle, Paul a Pharisaic Jew, Philemon, a wealthy Gentile, Onesimus, a run-away slave, all united, one in Christ as Jesus overcame social, cultural, and economic barriers.

*"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ."-- Galatians 2:26 and 28*

## Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

The letter to Philemon is short, sweet, and simple.

#### I. PRELUDE (1-3)

Paul loved to play with words. No where is it more evident than in this little personal note to Philemon. He was in Rome, a prisoner of the emperor, and yet he introduced himself as "*a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*" Paul really believed that he was in the will of God regardless of where he was.

He writes to Philemon, whom he knows well as a brother who is working hard for Jesus, even providing his home for the church to meet (v 2).

To Apphia, "*our beloved sister,*" who is believed to be Philemon's wife, and Archippus, who may have been his son. I believe he could have been a leader in the church, which Paul also greets.

#### II. PRAISE (4-7)

Many commentators feel that Paul is being very "Middle Eastern" by pouring lavish praise on Philemon in an attempt to gain an advantage since he is about to ask a great favor. It is, however, just like Paul. He genuinely appreciated his fellow workers and seemed to enjoy watching them grow and use their gifts.

Philemon's love and faith toward God is real. We know its real because he also expresses it "*toward all the saints*" (v 5), and "*the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you*" (v 7). Paul loves it and shares in it (v 7).

#### III. PLEA (8-17)

Paul has the authority, as an Apostle, to order Philemon to do what he knows is right, to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother, but he chooses instead to appeal to his well-known love and righteousness.

His appeal is made on the basis of three facts:

##### 1. Onesimus is now a believer. (v. 10)

*"I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment."*

##### 2. Onesimus is now more valuable. (vv. 11-14)

Again Paul plays with words. "*Onesimus, (who's name means useful) who formerly was useless to you (a runaway is of no value) now is useful both to you and to me.*" (v 11) In fact, Onesimus is now so useful to Paul in his prison ministry that sending him home is like "*sending my very heart.*" (vv. 12-13)

##### 3. Onesimus is now a brother. (vv. 14-17)

Paul knew that legally Philemon could have punished Onesimus. By law he could have him killed. This is a tough situation for Philemon. If he is easy on Onesimus, his other slaves might rebel or try

## Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

to become "Christians" to receive special treatment. If he was too hard he would be a poor example of forgiveness in the church.

But, Paul appeals to Philemon's faith in the providence of God. *"For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, . . . "* (vv. 15-16)

Paul really believed that accepting Onesimus was the same as accepting him, a partner in Christ. (v 17)

### IV. PLEDGE (18-22)

This portion of the letter provides us with two powerful truths:

#### 1. Forgiveness doesn't negate the need for reparation.

Just because Onesimus became a believer he was no less a thief and run away slave. He had brought damage and loss to Philemon.

Paul would not, therefore, suggest that he ignore the crime and forget about the debt. He would, instead, offer to pay the debt himself, allowing Philemon to receive Onesimus back. (vv. 18-19)

#### 2. We have an advocate before the Father.

We can almost hear Christ agreeing to pay the price of our sin, so that we might be reconciled to God. *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. --II Cor, 5:21*

Philemon was a slave to sin, and a "criminal" when Paul met him, and so, since Paul lead him to Jesus, he owes Paul his life (v. 19). Paul, knowing Philemon, is confident that he will be obedient to God and do *"even more"* than the minimum requirement Paul is suggesting in regards to forgiving Onesimus (v. 21).

### V. PERSONAL (23-25)

Paul told Philemon to get the guest room ready since he was planning to visit Colossae when he was released from prison (Phil 1:25-26). He concludes with greeting from his fellow workers in Rome and ends with a common benediction.

#### *Lessons:*

1. No barrier should separate us from other believers, not race, status, wealth, education, or circumstance.
2. The grace and forgiveness pictured in Philemon is a powerful illustration of God's grace toward us.