

Philemon

Introduction

What books in the Bible contain only one chapter (or no chapter divisions, according to math teachers)?

Obadiah (Old Testament prophet)
Philemon
2 John
3 John
Jude

Let us study together the book of *Philemon*

Where it is located in the Bible? At the end of the letters of Paul

The basic issue in *Philemon* is the question of slavery and how we treat our fellow human beings

- Before the days of the Civil War, this book was used by both sides – some Southerners used it to defend slavery, and the abolitionists used it to condemn slavery
- So it has been a book that has been used and abused by a lot of people

What are the basic beliefs and principles that are used to defend slavery?

- That people are “things” and can be bought and sold and used as objects
- The Greek philosopher Aristotle called slaves “living tools”
- The Roman writer Cicero in one of his works apologized for having shown kindness to one of his slaves
- In the First Century, slave owners had the power of life and death over their slaves
- Owners could beat slaves, even crucify them
- If two slaves had a child, the child was property of the slave owner

Why were First Century slave owners generally cruel to their slaves? Because the owners were vastly out numbered by the slaves (60-80 million slaves) – so punishment was severe for slaves who rebelled against their owners and extremely severe for runaway slaves

The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon by William Barclay (revised edition, 1975), p. 270:

"The master had absolute power over his slaves. He can box their ears or condemn them to hard labor—making them, for instance, work in chains upon his lands in the country, or in a sort of prison-factory. Or, he may punish them with blows of the rod, the lash or the knot; he can brand them upon the forehead, if they are thieves or runaways, or, in the end, if they prove irreclaimable, he can crucify them....

A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated. And, if a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter F—standing for *fugitivus*, *runaway*—and at the worst he would be crucified to death. Paul well knew all this and that slavery was so ingrained into the ancient world that even to send Onesimus back to the Christian Philemon was a considerable risk."

- Remember the rebellion of Spartacus (73-71 BC) – it was brutally put down, so that it would not spread to all the slaves – they could have taken over the Roman Empire
- The Empire was very concerned about what slaves might do if they rebelled as a group.

Philemon 1-3

V1 – Was Paul in prison at this time? Yes, two years at Rome (*Acts 28:16, 30*)

-He was under house arrest (he stayed at his own house, probably with soldier present)

-**What was Paul's way of beginning his letters?** Person sending the letter, person receiving the letter, a blessing on the reader

-**What can we assume about Philemon?** Rich (owner of slaves), and he was supporting a preacher in his house (Archippus - *Colossians 4:17*)

V2 – Where was the church in Colossae meeting? In Philemon's house

-**Advantages of that?** No building note, possibly more informal

-**Disadvantages of the church meeting in a member's house?** Not big enough, too informal (dog or cat wandering through), people are not able to find the house, complaining neighbors

-Other house churches: Rome (*Roman 16:5*), Corinth (*1 Corinthians 16:19*), Colossae (*Colossians 4:15*)

V3 – Christian greeting – Gentiles: Grace to you, **Jews:** Peace from God and Jesus Christ (shalom)

Philemon 4-7

V4 – What were Paul's prayers like? Usually full of thought

-**How does Paul show thanks for Philemon?** In his prayers

V5 – Why is he thankful? For Philemon's love and faith

-Notice toward all the saints (including slaves and Onesimus)

V6 – What else does Paul pray for? For a continual sharing of Philemon's goodness and his fellowship

V7 – "Saints found rest" – indicates Philemon's money was used to help many saints

-**How does Paul compliment Philemon in v 7?** Joy and comfort in your love

Philemon 8-9

V8 – What could Paul have done concerning Onesimus? Commanded Philemon to let Onesimus stay with Paul and help him with evangelism in Rome

V9 – But was the basis of Paul's appeal? Love

-**What were Paul's qualifications for the plea?** Aged (50-60 years old at this time); in prison

-**When did we first see Paul in the Scriptures?** *Acts 7:58* – holding clothes of Stephen (Paul had changed a lot over the years)

Philemon 10-12

V10 – In what sense was Onesimus a "child" of Paul? Converted by Paul

- So Onesimus ran away from Philemon to Rome
- Why would Onesimus have run away to Rome?** To get lost in the crowds of people there
- But Onesimus met Paul in Rome (maybe after hearing of him preach in Philemon's house)

V 11 – What kind of slave had Onesimus been? Not much good (Onesimus = useful and profitable)
 -We have names today that have obvious meanings (Ernest, Bill, Ray, etc.)

V 12 – How should Philemon accept back Onesimus? As Paul (“sending my very heart”)

Philemon 13-20

V 13 – What was Paul requesting (as delicately as possible) that Philemon do? That he send Onesimus back to Rome to assist Paul
 -Notice Paul's diplomacy: *“My imprisonment for the gospel”*

V 14 – Excellent tact and diplomacy of Paul – no compulsion, but your own free will

V 15 – More diplomacy? “Parted,” not “he ran away”
 -**God's providence in Onesimus running away?** Now a brother forever
 -In other words, this temporary loss became an eternal gain

V 16 – What then is the Christian view of slavery? All Christians are brothers
 -Notice that Paul did not demand freedom for the slave – rather, that Onesimus be treated as a brother in Christ (not as a thing)
 -**Can you have a brother in Christ and mistreat him?** No

V 17 – Paul's request? To accept Onesimus as he would have accepted Paul

V 18-19 – In addition to running away, what else had Onesimus probably done? Stolen money from Philemon
 -Paul: “I will repay you for what he stole”
 -**But was Paul able to repay Philemon?** Of course not (in prison, penniless), besides...
 -**What did Philemon owe Paul?** His soul (Paul had probably converted Philemon)

V 20 – What would cheer Paul up? Benefitting from Philemon
 -So the resolution of this affair: Paul is asking Philemon to send Onesimus back to Rome to assist Paul in his work there
 -**Do you think that Philemon did this?** How could he have possibly refused this request after a letter like this!

Philemon 21-25

V 21 – Paul's hope? That Philemon would do more than Paul was expecting

V 22 – Future plans for Paul? To be released soon and to visit Philemon in Colossae

V 23 – Epaphras (began the church in Colossae – *Colossian 1:7*); maybe now be in prison himself

V 24 – Other workers in Rome: Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke

-**Any interesting comments about this list?** Mark – once was “disowned” by Paul (on the Second Missionary Journey)

-Luke – the good doctor is still with Paul helping with his "thorn in the flesh"

-Demas – later denied the faith (see *2 Timothy 4:10*)

V 25 – Final blessing of Paul to Philemon

Conclusions

What motives did Paul use in appealing to Philemon in this letter?

1. *V 11* – play on words (Onesimus = useless, useful)

2. *V 16* – forgive him as a brother

3. Paul offered to repay any stolen money (an empty offer)

4. *V 22* – “I’m coming to visit you soon”

5. *V 21* – “You will do more than I ask” – appeal to higher expectations.

-According to the letters of Ignatius (50 years later), Onesimus became an elder in the church

Basic messages of this book: “You get more done with honey than with vinegar”

-We will accomplish more with kindness than with violence and demands

-More is accomplished by establishing respect and love

There is the old story of the contest between the sun and the wind concerning which one could make a man walking down the road take his coat off

-The wind blew and blew, but the harder it blew, the more the man held onto his coat and drew it around himself. The wind failed

-However, the sun came out with its warmth, and pretty soon the man took off his coat

-**The lesson?** Warmth and kindness ultimately work better than the strong-armed approach

-Even slavery can be overcome with kindness; in fact, slavery cannot co-exist with the Christian faith

Can you think of other scriptures where we read this same basic thought? *Matthew 7:12*

Optional material

Other Scriptures used on the subject of slavery:

- *Colossians 3:11, Galatians 3:28-29* – no distinction between slaves and free people

- *Philippians 2:3-4* – regard others more highly than ourselves

- *Romans 10:12* – God is the Lord of all

- *1 Corinthians 12:13* – no distinction among Christians

- *Acts 10:28* – Peter was just a man

- *2 Corinthians 5:16* – recognize no man according to the flesh

**What New Testament person showed great kindness toward his slave? Roman Centurion –
Read Luke 7:1-10**

Other applications: marriage relationship (kindness needed), elders and congregation, the job (how to treat other workers, boss), etc.

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