

PHILEMON

Main Theme: Forgiveness

Primary Reference Source: The McArthur Study Bible

Background: Paul's letter to Philemon was written during the first Roman imprisonment between A.D. 60 and A.D. 62. This epistle is referred to as a prison epistle along with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. Philemon had been saved under Paul's ministry several years earlier, probably in Ephesus. Philemon was a slave owner in Colosse, and one of his slaves, Onesimus, stole some money and ran away. Onesimus fled to Rome and through circumstances not recorded in scripture, he met Paul and became a Christian. Although Paul cared deeply for Onesimus, he knew that his running away from Philemon was a violation of Roman law. Paul knew that this situation had to be rectified, so he sent Onesimus back to Colosse with Tychicus. Tychicus was returning to Colosse with Paul's epistle to the Colossians. Along with the Colossian letter, Paul sent a personal letter to Philemon exhorting him to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back to his household as a brother in Christ. It is interesting to note that the New Testament does not condemn slavery, nor does it record the church going through political channels to outlaw the practice of slavery. Had these avenues been pursued, the message of the gospel would have been confused with social reform. Instead, first century Christianity undermined the evils of slavery by teaching slaves and masters the gospel, and encouraging them to live a life worthy of the gospel. Where this is done, slavery's abuses were neutralized.

SCRIPTURE VERSES AND SCRIPTURE TEXT FROM THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION BIBLE IN BOLD

Philemon Chapter 1

- 1. Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,**
- 2. to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:**
- 3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
- 4. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,**
- 5. hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the
saints,**
- 6. that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every
good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.**
- 7. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have
been refreshed by you, brother.**

Philemon 1:1-7 Paul greets Philemon addressing him as a friend and fellow laborer. Paul expands on his greeting by stating that he knows that Philemon is in the faith, and that this is evidenced by his love for the brethren.

- 8. Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,**
- 9. yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you – being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now
also a prisoner of Jesus Christ --**
- 10. I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,**
- 11. who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.**

Philemon 1:8-11 Since Philemon is in the faith and he understands that he is to have love for the brethren, which now includes Onesimus, Paul was in a good position to command and appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

- 12. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,**
- 13. whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my
chains for the gospel.**
- 14. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by
compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.**

Philemon 1:12-14 Paul expresses in his letter to Philemon his love and appreciation for Onesimus. Paul states that he wishes to keep Onesimus for himself but he is compelled to do the right thing. Such statements by Paul elevated Onesimus to the position of being useful to the apostle Paul himself. As an apostle, Paul knew that he carried great authority and importance in the church.

- 15. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,**
- 16. no longer as a slave but more than a slave – a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.**

Philemon 1:15-16 Paul continues to elevate Onesimus by stating that his return did not constitute a mere slave returning to his master, but a Christian brother reuniting with a fellow Christian (Philemon).

- 17. If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.**

Philemon 1:17 Paul elevates Onesimus even more by telling Philemon to accept Onesimus as a partner in the gospel ministry even as he (Philemon) accepts the apostle (Paul) himself as a partner.

- 18. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.**
- 19. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay – not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.**
- 20. Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.**

Philemon 1:18-20 These verses contain the main theme of the epistle. Paul asks Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and if he owes anything the apostle (Paul) would pay the debt. In the next sentence, Paul reminds Philemon about the spiritual debt of sin that was forgiven him, because Paul himself brought the gospel to him. Philemon's debt of sin is infinitely greater than any amount of money Onesimus took.

- 21. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.**
- 22. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.**

Philemon 1:21-22 Paul assures Philemon that he has confidence in him that he will carry out the apostle's wishes. Paul also states that his instructions concerning Philemon are the minimum requirements. In verse 21 Paul says, I know that you will do even more than I say.

- 23. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,**
- 24. as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.**
- 25. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.**

Philemon 1:23-25 "The story of the once severed but now mended relationship between Paul and Mark (Acts 15:38-40; 2 Timothy 4:11) would have been well known to the believers in Colosse (Colossians 4:10). Listing Mark's name here would serve to remind Philemon that Paul himself had worked through the issues of forgiveness, and that the instructions he was passing on to his friend were ones the apostle himself had already implemented in his relationship with John Mark."