

Philemon: A Chapter-by-Chapter Study

Introduction

Philemon is a short letter (a single chapter) from the Apostle Paul to a fellow believer in Colossae. Philemon owned a slave name Onesimus who had stolen from him, run away, and then met Paul and became a Christian. Paul issued this letter to ask Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus back. It is likely that Onesimus and Tychicus carried this letter along with Paul's letter to the Colossians. It should also be noted that Paul may very well have written this letter while imprisoned in Rome (Acts 28). Some think it possible that Paul wrote this while imprisoned in Ephesus, but this is highly debatable and unlikely.

Most scholars believe this to be one of Paul's cleverest letters as there is some word play that would have Philemon take pause before acting too harshly towards his returned slave, mostly in verses 10-21. This letter seems to be carefully written; each word chosen to soften the heart of the intended recipient.

There are two questions the readers should ask of themselves when finished with this short letter. One, what is the purpose of this letter and, two, why include this in the Holy Bible? The first answer is to show the level of forgiveness one must aspire to as a Christian. The master/slave relationship of ancient Rome was very one-sided and could be brutal and even fatal for the slave. For a slave to be treated favorably was rare, let alone ever forgiven for a wrong done to the master. This should also remind us that sometimes we are in the position of offering forgiveness, but sometimes we are in the position of needing forgiveness. The second answer is that this shows that the Christian relationship to God overrides all other relationships here on Earth. Our focus should be on God above all else. Following His word and His example should come before all other relationships, social statuses, and cultural norms.

Chapter 1

V1-3

Paul opens this letter with a greeting from prison, making it clear of the circumstances that he is in. Timothy is also mentioned as he may likely be known to Philemon. Paul addresses Philemon as an imprisoned friend, not as an apostle.

Who are Apphia and Archippus?

This is an unusual opening for Paul as this letter is likely addressing Apphia as the wife of Philemon and Archippus as the son of Philemon. This letter would involve the entire family, though, as the wife would traditionally be the supervisor of the slaves in the household during the Roman era. Archippus would be the acting head of household in the absence of Philemon, so Paul addresses the entire family.

Not only does Paul address the family of Philemon, but he addresses the church that evidently met in his house. This letter would be read to the entire congregation that attended church in the house of Philemon.

V4-7

Paul starts off this address by praising Philemon for the work he has done as a Christian. Although some may consider this a way to "butter up" Philemon, Paul does not lie here. He simply reminds Philemon of

the good charity work he has done. This will hopefully remind Philemon to be charitable to his wayward slave.

V8-11

These verses can appear to be almost manipulative, yet Paul speaks only the truth.

- As an apostle, Paul could claim some sort of seniority over Philemon as one of the heads of the early Christian church. Instead, Paul makes it a point to ask Philemon for a favor.
- Paul reminds Philemon that he is in prison and knows what it is like to be treated as a slave.
- Paul calls Onesimus his “son,” but this is probably because Paul himself lead Onesimus to Christ.
- Paul lets Philemon know that even though he may be without a slave, Onesimus had become a valued friend to Paul which should please Philemon.

Paul uses the word “appeal” in verse 10. There is more historical context to this word than what would be found by today’s standards. There is an ancient Greek and later Roman law that allowed an escaped slave to seek sanctuary at any religious altar, whether it be in a temple or even a home. The head of the temple or household would then be obligated to either persuade the slave to return to their former owner or sell the slave at auction and give the money to the former owner. This would be the primary reason for the slave to run away to Rome, the most likely meeting place of Onesimus and Paul. Paul is acting on behalf of Onesimus for Philemon.

There is speculation as to how Onesimus the runaway slave came to be in contact with Paul in Rome. It is unlikely this is just coincidence. Since Philemon was a Christian that hosted a church in his home, and from the friendly tone of Paul to Philemon, it is almost a certainty that Onesimus has interacted with Paul on some level and that he sought Paul out as a result of this previous meeting.

V12-19

Some perceive verses 12-14 as Paul “laying it on thick,” as it were. Paul attaches himself to Onesimus using the words “my own heart” and as someone “I wished to keep with me.” Paul even tells Philemon that Onesimus’ actions as a fellow Christian are an extension of Philemon as the master of Onesimus. Again, this may seem manipulative, but these words are true and full of forgiveness. Paul is simply reminding Philemon that he is a Christian above all else.

Paul also reminds Philemon that the action he takes is his own choice. Paul maybe trying hard to save Onesimus as a runaway slave, but the culture and laws of the day make the fate of Onesimus clearly the decision of Philemon.

Paul softens the “runaway” aspect of Onesimus by stating that he simply “departed for a while” and that this journey could have been intended by God to bring Onesimus to Paul. He also reminds Philemon that he may have lost a slave temporarily, but he gained a brother in Christ for eternity.

The last of these verses is Paul acting in a Christlike manner. Paul offers himself for Onesimus to repay whatever Philemon may have lost by the actions of this slave. However, Paul does remind Philemon that it was he who lead Philemon to Christ.

V20-25

Verse 20 contains a play on words which is not seen in the English. The Greek word for “joy” in this verse is more accurately translated as “profit” and is seen in the original Greek as “oninemi.” This is the root

word for the name of the slave. This statement could almost read, "...let me have Onesimus from you in the Lord."

Paul is repeating the phrase "refresh my heart" (verse 7 and verse 12) in the hopes that Philemon might return his slave to Paul as he has become a valuable asset in Paul's work.

Another indicator that Paul is not being manipulative is found in verse 22. Paul and Philemon have such a strong relationship that Paul knows he is welcome in the house of his friend. Paul isn't writing a persuasive letter to someone he's never met. He's writing to a friend in Christ and reminding him that he is a Christian and to not let the worldly ways of retribution and the poor treatment of slaves get in the way of doing what is right.

The final verses are of a typical letter, sending greetings from common friends. Ephaphras, Mark, Aristachus, Demas, and Luke are also mentioned in the letter to the Colossians adding weight to the claim that these two letters were written closely together.

References

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