

Pauline Epistle: PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

Even though Philemon is brief—more of a postcard than a letter! —it packs a punch with three different and thought-provoking perspectives about demonstrating the love of Jesus.

Paul, the author of this letter, is imprisoned in Rome. His message about Jesus has been making waves, eventually leading to his arrest. Philemon, the recipient of this letter, is free at home in Colossae, even leading a church in his house after becoming a follower of Jesus through Paul's ministry. Onesimus, the subject of this letter, is a run-away slave belonging to Philemon. Though he was in Philemon's household formerly, he recently ran away because of some unspecified conflict or wrongdoing. However, he has since become a follower of Jesus through Paul's ministry also.

Sometime between A.D. 60-64, Paul wrote this letter to Philemon concerning Onesimus. Paul petitions Philemon to welcome Onesimus back into his household, not as a slave but as a beloved brother in Christ.

For readers of Philemon today, taking on the three different perspectives of these men helps remind us of what it looks like to love God and others in any season of life. Whether we're currently burdened, free, or seeking forgiveness and restoration, Philemon reminds us that our "invisible faith becomes visible" (Step Bible) as we demonstrate the love of God to those around us, regardless of our circumstance or status.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Though it may not be as evident today, people's last names (or surnames) often helped others identify people by their occupation, location, or personal characteristics. Last names such as Barber, Bowman, Mason, and Cook share histories of people more than we realize. For thousands of years, last names have communicated much more than just a title; they're deeply tethered to an occupation, a purpose, or a lifestyle.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul reminds us of the importance of these connected titles and occupations. He aspires for Onesimus to no longer be known as a slave but rather as a brother in Christ, and for Philemon to live out his calling as a dear friend, co-laborer, and follower of Jesus. Like a Barber who cuts hair or a Cook who prepares food, the letter to Philemon reminds us of our unifying family name: Christians who are called to live like Christ.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

- Paul's Peace & Grace Greeting (Phm 1:1-3)
- Paul's Prayer (Phm 1:4-7)
- Paul's Plea (Phm 1:8-16)
- Paul's Pledge (Phm 1:17-22)
- Paul's Parting Grace (Phm 1:23-25)

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

What's the common denominator between a man in prison, a man free at home, and a man on the run? The letter itself reminds us—Jesus. Depending on which Bible translation you read, the names and titles of Jesus, Lord, or Christ appear almost 20 times in these short 25 verses. At the center of each man's circumstance is the profound and transforming love of Jesus. Regardless of their situation or status, they are all welcomed, beloved, and meaningful in the family of God.

The letter to Philemon showcases a variety of Christlike imagery—an innocent Paul taking on another's payment and debt; an opportunity to give a slave a new and freeing identity as a brother in Christ; and a picture of forgiveness and reconciliation birthed out of humility and submission to God.

As God in human form, Jesus came to earth to take on the debt of humanity as we had turned away from God and his design for our flourishing. By cancelling our debt, he removed from us the immense burdens we hold through sin and shame. And now he invites us to no longer be slaves to sin but brothers and sisters in the family of God. Rather than us having to work our way into God's good favor, Jesus reconciled us to God so that we can fully inherit the blessings of being in his family. These blessings, from the fruit of the Spirit to eternal life, are known and understood as we humbly learn to surrender to God and his plan for our lives.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

OBSERVATION

- **Author:** Verses 1 and 19 tell us that Paul is writing to Philemon, with other brothers and sisters of the faith included as well.
- What is the organization of **Philemon**?
- **Family Language**
 - In the letter to Philemon, family language is used around 12 times to describe how followers of Jesus are to live in relationship with one another. Paul utilizes words like *brother*, *sister*, *dear*, *fellow*, *child*, and *father* to describe the deeply interconnected relationships between the believers addressed in his letter, and, through these words he makes an appeal to Philemon to welcome Onesimus into the family as a completely forgiven and restored member.
 - Onesimus' former title of slave is gone; he has a new title as brother in Christ. Paul makes it clear that followers of Jesus are not simply known by a title or a name; they are known by demonstrated acts of love toward one another as a healthy family should live. If the name Jesus is attached to a person, it should be deeply observable in their occupation, purpose, and lifestyle. The old identity of that person is gone, and the new identity of "in Christ" has come.

INTERPRETATION

- **Literary context:**
 - The book of Philemon is an epistle, or letter. It was written for a specific reason from an author (Paul) with the expectation that the recipient (Philemon) would respond in a specific way. When we read Philemon today, it's like we're reading Paul and Philemon's

mail! This is a personal appeal and encouragement, communicating hopes and stories between ministry partners. Because of this personal nature, it's best to read the entire letter altogether as it was intended to be received, paying close attention to the overall aim of the message and the argument being developed.

- **Consider reading Philemon and Colossians together.** The letter to the Colossians is a letter to the whole church at Colossae (which includes Philemon's people) and can provide more insight on the church's story. In Colossians 4:9, we see Onesimus make an appearance again as Paul calls him a "faithful and dear brother, who is one of you."
- **Narrative context:**
 - While Paul is in prison, Philemon is leading a house church with others in his household (Phm 2). Paul remembers how Philemon has loved and refreshed the saints, and he appeals to him to continue to do so with Onesimus, his runaway slave.
 - Throughout the story of Scripture, God initiates multiple acts of redemption and restoration for his people: the exodus from slavery in Egypt, the return from exile and captivity in Babylon, and the climactic event of Jesus' work on the cross that removed the burden of sin.
 - Now, Philemon has a choice to model Christlike character by offering the gift of freedom to Onesimus and receiving him into the family as a beloved brother in Christ. Will Philemon help steward the kingdom of God while he has the chance?
- **Historical/Cultural context:**
 - The letter to Philemon may bring up an important question as we read it with modern eyes: does God approve of slavery? Even though Paul appeals to Philemon to welcome back Onesimus as a freed and forgiven brother in Christ, why doesn't he clearly condemn slavery as well?
 - To answer this question, there are two helpful things to consider. First, slavery in the Bible did not look like the slavery we imagine today in U.S. history. Oftentimes, this slavery (or servanthood) was a means to pay back debt that a person owed or to provide for someone who would otherwise have no means of survival. Second, slavery was never God's intention.
 - As we see in Genesis 1, God created all of humanity in his image, called to rule and reign together as equals. However, in humanity's fallenness, slavery became widely practiced, and some historians suggest that complete removal of slavery systems during New Testament times could have created more harm than good, causing people to go without food and provision. As we read various parts of Scripture regarding slavery, we see stories of God's "progression of instruction . . . [giving] guidance to protect slaves and give them more dignity," not endorse slavery as an ideal human practice (Dan Kimball).
 - As followers of Jesus today, our aim is to restore dignity to every human and to partner with God in long-term, sustainable human flourishing.

APPLICATION

- First, like the imprisoned Paul, how do we adapt and continue to minister to people even when our circumstances are challenging?
- Second, like the free Philemon, how could we humbly extend our gift of freedom to those burdened and enslaved around us, even if they have wronged us?

- And finally, like the runaway Onesimus, whose name means “useful,” how can we find our ultimate purpose, identity, and home in the family of God?

PRAYER

- Paul writes that he always thanks God in his prayers for Philemon and his church about how their faith is made evident in the way they love people (Phm 4). Who are people that you can thank God for because they have encouraged and loved people well?
- Paul opens and concludes his letter with names of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, recognizing the importance of community in our spiritual formation and accountability. Ask God to strengthen the Christian relationships around you so that you can grow in your love for him and others.
- Which person do you most relate to in the letter? Paul? Philemon? Onesimus? Consider their story and their struggles. Ask God to “deepen your understanding of every blessing that belongs to you in Christ” (Phm 6) so that you may navigate this season of your life with the hope and security of belonging to the family of God.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT CHURCH HISTORY HAS SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF PHILEMON

“There is a spiritual brotherhood between all true believers, however distinguished in civil and outward respects; they are all children of the same heavenly Father, have a right to the same spiritual privileges and benefits, must love and do all good offices to and for one another as brethren, though still in the same rank, and degree, and station, wherein they were called.”

—Matthew Henry

“Scripture does not sanction slavery, but at the same time does not begin a political crusade against it. It sets forth principles of love to our fellow men which were sure (as they have done) in due time to undermine and overthrow it, without violently convulsing the then existing political fabric, by stirring up slaves against their masters.”

—A.R. Fausset

SOURCES

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