

**14026-E April 2, 2014**

## **The Book of Philemon**

**Introduction:** Have you even wondered why the Lord would allow any unjust or unfair treatment to happen or persist in your life?

Have you inwardly question if He was truly in control of your particular circumstance when on the surface it appeared everything was out of control or not under His care?

Is there a situation you can look back to and see clearly the unfolding of His plan and purposes in that very difficult season?

### **History/Background**

It is believed that the letter to Philemon and Colossians were sent at the same time (60-63 A.D.), perhaps as one volume “written by Paul’s own hand” in Rome to the church in Colossae. This small letter is addressed to the leader, Philemon, who had the Church of Colossae meeting in his home. Paul uses great tact in crafting his letter to Philemon because of the cultural and moral dilemma concerning slavery, and the delicate situation which he and the church were facing.

### **The Slavery Issue**

The treatment of slaves in the Roman Empire was callous and cruel. Slaves, purchased by their owners, were under the complete authority and ownership of their masters. Frequently savage punishment was executed on slaves for the slightest of infractions and they were seen as things rather than persons. Masters had no moral obligation towards their slaves at all. If the slaves were owned, it was for as long as the master deemed necessary. Both Roman law and ancient custom required punishment and restitution if there was any damage or desertion by the slaves.

### **The Situation**

Philemon was the slave owner of Onesimus. Onesimus ran away from Colossae to Rome and in the process ran into Paul who was under house arrest. He was converted to Christ by the apostle Paul and began helping Paul in his ministry and service. It’s time for Onesimus to return to his earthly master so Paul firmly and passionately pens this letter to Philemon to receive back Onesimus now as a Christian.

### **The Moral Dilemma**

1. Paul: You'll notice that at no time in the letter Paul asks Philemon to set Onesimus free or states that slavery is wrong. This matter was so entrenched that it could have caused more upheaval than it was worth. How does he approach this sensitive matter when culturally, there are expectations, and in fact law, to back these kinds of situations with slaves?
2. Philemon: He has been cheated, taken advantage of by Onesimus. He has rights as a slave owner. Punishment, scrutiny and restitution must be made. Philemon had every opportunity to come to Christ when he lived under Philemon's roof. What should he do?
3. Onesimus: Never did he expect to meet Christ while he was a fugitive. He was well acquainted with the law and knew he should be facing a brutal penalty should he get caught. Now Paul request to do what Onesimus never thought possible that he could do. Return to the life he left and ran away from? He is forgiven and free in Christ but still has a debt to pay. What's he to do?

### **Themes of the Letter**

1. The Providence of God
2. The Reconciliation of Christ
3. The Transformation of a Christian's Behavior

### **Key verses**

Philemon 15-16...Perhaps he was he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother..

#### **I. Paul's Wise Introduction and Gracious Comments vs.1-7**

##### **A. Paul the Prisoner vs.1**

Paul gives an insight to where he is going with the letter, " Paul a prisoner". He does the same when he addressed the Church in Crete for different reasons when he wrote, " Paul an Apostle."

##### **B. The Recipients vs.2**

He addresses the letter to a family first:

- Philemon- leader, owner of the home and slave, father, husband.
- Apphia- Philemon's wife who shared in the ministry
- Archippus- their son and probably pastor of the house church (Col:17)

##### **C. . Grace and Peace vs.3**

A common greeting of Paul but something he specifically appeal to now that they are all in Christ.

##### **D. Paul's encouragement to Philemon vs.4-7**

It's interesting that Paul always encourages first before correction or instruction. People can feel placated at times when we do this or have it done to us, but it actually was common for Paul. Examples:

- He thanks God for Philemon in his prayers. vs.4
- He commends him for his love/faith for the Lord and the saints. vs.5
- He refers to the sharing or fellowship of his faith and how full, rich and effective it was. vs.6
- Paul himself says that he has much joy and comfort from him vs.7a
- His love refreshed the hearts of the saints. vs.7b

## II. Paul's Passionate Appeal vs.8-22

Note: On the surface it can almost feel like Paul is on the edge of manipulation. It seems however, that his heart is so moved at the transforming power of Christ and the need for reconciliation in the backdrop of their culture and slavery, that he holds nothing back.

### A. The Power of the Appeal vs. 8-11

1. His authority- "Though I am bold enough to command you" " yet for love's sake" vs.8
2. His condition- " I Paul an old man and now a prisoner" vs.9
3. His convert- Paul became Onesimus's father while now in prison vs.10
4. His view of the transformation- Paul's play on words. Onesimus means "useful or profitable" One who was useless is now useful. vs.11
5. His very heart- treat him like would treat me." As my partner, receive him as you would receive me". vs.12;17
6. His sacrifice- Paul actually prefers that Onesimus stay with him. vs.13
7. Paul-s motivation- He desires Philemon's act be one of free will. vs14

### B. The Theology Behind the Appeal vs.15-16

1. A Providential act of God  
Old Testament Examples (Joseph; Esther; Jonah)  
vs.15" For perhaps this is why he was parted (passive voice) from you for a while"
  - Onesimus travels 1300 miles to get away from Philemon because he feels will never be found in the populated alleyways of Rome.
  - He sat under the gospel message in Colosse but that wasn't Gods timing. Rome was!

**Reflection: Do you have a loved one who has departed and is out of your care and persuasion? Have they left under violating or**

**harsh circumstances? What is the Lord requiring of you during this time of separation?**

*vs.16 "No longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother"  
Nothing like good old fashion theology to change our perspective of what God is doing through our heartbreak.*

**C. The Christlikeness of the Appeal vs.17-21**

1. *We are brothers now, treat us the same vs.17*
2. *I will pay his debt, I will repay it vs.18-19*
3. Reward my request as you have benefited from your conversion vs.19
4. Refresh my heart in Christ; The nature of Jesus is reconciliation. vs.20
5. Confidence of Philemon's Obedience to think like Christ vs.21
6. Paul wants to reunite and be with him again vs.22

**D. Final Farewell 22-25**

Like bookends he ends the letter as he began it: "The grace of the Lord Jesus"

**III. Application**

- A. We also have a debt we could not pay that was posted to Christ account. This is why we must let past injuries go. (Matt 15)
- B. We are pressured from the world at times to exercise our rights and justify our unwillingness to pull back and never trust again. God calls us to respond and think kingdom not culture.
- C. Ask ourselves for a God perspective of what he is doing in the lives of those we miss. Focus on his providence not our feelings.