

# The Letter of Philemon

*by Rick Shoemaker*

Philemon is the recipient of this letter. He was an important member of the church at Colosse (v.1-2 cf. Col. 4:9). The church met in Philemon's house (v.2).

The letter was written by Paul while he was under arrest in Rome (v.1). It is one of the three letters that are commonly called prison epistles. The other two are Philippians and Colossians.

Philemon is one of Paul's friends. Paul is writing to Philemon about a man named Onesimus (v.10-11).

Onesimus had been one of Philemon's slaves. Onesimus had stolen some money from Philemon, and gone to Rome, no doubt, hoping to get lost in the crowds.

As God would have it, Paul met Onesimus and led him to the Lord.

Now, Paul is writing Philemon to tell him he is sending Onesimus back. He tells Philemon to accept him as he would Paul himself. Onesimus will be the one who carries this letter to Paul.

Even though there is no direct doctrinal instruction, the application of the truths found within this letter is full of doctrine.

## OUTLINE

### THE PRISONER FOUND IN THIS LETTER TO PHILEMON vv. 1-3

Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter.

### THE PRAYER FOUND IN THIS LETTER TO PHILEMON v. 4

Paul didn't see Philemon often but he prayed for him regularly.

### THE PRAISE FOUND IN THIS LETTER TO PHILEMON vv. 5-6

Paul commends Philemon

### THE PLEA FOUND IN THIS LETTER TO PHILEMON vv. 8-17

Paul asks Philemon to have mercy on Onesimus.

### THE PROMISE FOUND IN THIS LETTER TO PHILEMON vv. 18-21

## 1. THE PRISONER FOUND IN THIS LETTER vv. 1-3

*Phm 1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,*

Paul identifies himself as the writer of this letter from its beginning. We sign our names at the end of our letters. But, in Paul's day, the writer of a letter would start by putting their name first.

Paul calls himself "*a prisoner of Jesus Christ*". He is in a Roman prison as he writes this letter (Acts 20: 30-31) but he does not call himself a prisoner of Rome. He calls himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not see himself as a prisoner of his circumstances. Like Joseph of old, Paul recognized the fact that God was working all things to his good (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

He has given himself to the Lord and has become his bondman. He has reached a place where he is content with whatever God sends his way (cf. Phil. 4:11). If the Lord has a purpose for him to be in prison, that's fine with him. May the Lord work that same attitude in us.

We may wonder why a man like Paul spent time in prison. Why would God allow him to be confined when he could be out preaching across the countryside?

Paul answers this question in Philippians. He says his time in prison had actually led to the gospel reaching many souls.

*Php 1:12-13 But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;*

He said God had used him in prison in a way he could not have had he been on the outside

Think of all the people Paul came in contact with because he was in prison. The guards, the judges, the cooks, the food-tasters, the musicians, the stablemen, the accountants, and all the visitors. Paul would have never preached to these people had he not been in prison.

Paul turned his cell into a pulpit. We can do the same, in the doctor's office, the hospital room, the corner store, or our next elevator ride.

Paul also said his time in prison encouraged other believers to take a stand for the Lord.

*Php 1:14 And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

Some of the brethren had become more bold because they heard about Paul. When they heard of Paul's faithfulness while in prison, it inspired them to serve in spite of their difficulties.

Paul's closeness to Philemon can be seen in his first comment. He does not call himself an apostle as he does in 9 of his 13 epistles. He is coming to Philemon as a friend.

Paul calls Philemon his "*fellowlabourer*". Some believe this means Philemon was a preacher but this word can be used for a preacher, a deacon, or simply a dedicated church member. How we need dedicated church members who don't have to hold an office to be satisfied. The local church will rise or fall upon these types of people. Pastors and deacons are necessary, but no church will function without laypeople who simply love the Lord and want to do something for him.

Timothy was with Paul at this time.

*Phm 2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:*

Paul includes Apphia and Archippus in his greeting. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus was probably his son. A man named Archippus is mentioned in Colossians 4:17 but we can't be certain if this is the same Archippus.

The words, "*the church in thy house*" lets us know at least a portion of the church in Colosse met in Philemon's house. Till the third century, Christians had no buildings to worship in. The Jews had their synagogues, but the Christians met in homes (Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15).

*Phm 3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul uses his usual greeting of grace and peace (Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:2).

Grace means God did it without our help. He saves us by grace (Rom.11:6; Eph.1:7, 2:5,8; Titus 3:7 ). He takes care of us by grace (1 Cor. 15:10). He provides for us by grace.

Paul includes peace in his greeting. Notice, he says grace before peace. He never reverses this order. We can never have peace apart from grace. True peace comes only by God's grace in our lives.

## **2. THE PRAYER FOUND IN THIS LETTER v. 4**

*Phm 4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,*

Paul thanks the Lord for Philemon.

He thanked God for putting Philemon in his life. He knew that even the people he met were a part of God's work in his life. We would do well to recognize the same is true for us. God uses people as tools to develop

us. We should be careful about how we respond to the people we come in contact with. God may be trying to use them to round off some of our rough edges.

Paul prayed for Philemon. Paul's prayer life always amazes me. He traveled to so many places and met so many people, yet he prayed for all these people (Rom.1:9; Eph.1:16; 2 Tim.1:3). He prayed earnestly and he prayed specifically.

### 3. THE PRAISE FOUND IN THIS LETTER vv. 5-6

*Phm 5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;*

Paul had heard about Philemon's spiritual condition, maybe from Onesimus.

Philemon's godly lifestyle was an encouragement to Paul. We never know who is watching or listening. We have no idea how much of a blessing we can be to others.

The reason for Paul's thanksgiving was Philemon's godly life. Philemon had a faith in the Lord and a love for people. What a wonderful testimony.

Paul reverses the usual order of these words. Faith would usually come before love because love is the result of faith. Paul writes love first because he is calling on Philemon to have compassion for Onesimus.

Paul tells Philemon what he has been praying for.

*Phm 6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*

Paul is praying that Philemon might understand more and more what all God has done in him. And, by understanding this, he might be even more of a blessing to those around him.

Paul talks about "*the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus*". He is talking about how we are to learn more and more about what was done in us when we got saved. God did a lot more than forgive us when we got saved.

The words "*thy faith may become effectual*" remind us that faith is something that affects our actions. This, in turn, affects those around us because they watch our lives. Paul says this in another way in Philippians. He says, "*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:13).

This is to be the manner of life for every Christian. As we understand more and more about what the Lord has done in us, our lives become an overflow of the work of God. In the process, others are touched, helped, and changed. The lost are drawn to Christ and the saved are encouraged to become what they see in us. One reason why our witness is unsuccessful at times is because we have not recognized the power that works in us.

*Phm 7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.*

Paul continues by telling Philemon how much of a blessing he has been. The word "*great*" means many. Paul said he had experienced many joys because of Philemon.

These words are such a blessing to me. Paul opens his heart and tells Philemon how much he has blessed him and others. Philemon has truly been a blessing to many people.

The Jews considered the "*bowels*" to be the place of a person's affections. They used "*bowels*" much like we use the word "heart".

### 4. THE PLEA FOUND IN THIS LETTER vv. 8-17

*Phm 8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,*

Paul now turns to the primary reason he has written to Philemon. He is about to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back.

Paul says he "*might be much bold in Christ*". The word "*enjoin*" means to command. The word "*convenient*" means proper or the right thing.

He is saying he has the authority as an apostle to demand Philemon to do what is right.

Paul continues by saying he isn't commanding, he's asking in love as a brother in Christ. He is about to ask for a personal favor of Philemon.

*Phm 9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*

Paul is asking Philemon to do this out for love's sake. He goes so far as to pull on Philemon's emotions by mentioning his age (probably in his sixties) and the fact that he is in prison.

This certainly should speak to us. What we do for the Lord should be out of love and not out of necessity. If we do only that which we must, we are indeed poor disciples.

*Phm 10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:*

This verse tells us a great deal.

This verse tells us the reason for this letter. Paul tells Philemon he writing on behalf of Onesimus.

This verse tells us Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord. He calls him "my son" and he says "whom I have begotten". We can't be sure how this happened. Maybe Onesimus ended up in the same prison where Paul was. Maybe Onesimus heard about Paul and his message and was drawn by the Spirit to visit Paul.

This verse tells us how Paul felt about those he led to conversion. He felt like a spiritual father.

Whatever the circumstances that led to his conversion, the Lord has done a work in the heart of Onesimus. Like with all true converts, he is not the same.

Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel. I'm glad he didn't quit serving the Lord when he went to prison. Humanly speaking, Onesimus would have never been saved if Paul had not been in prison. I'm afraid the average Christian of today would throw in the towel long before they ended up in prison.

Today's average Christian is already way too quiet when it comes to sharing their faith. One negative comment from one person is all it takes for the average Christian to stop witnessing.

*Phm 11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:*

Onesimus had caused heartache to Philemon.

Onesimus had undoubtedly stolen something from Philemon. He had been unprofitable to Philemon. But, that has all changed now. The old Onesimus was gone.

The name Onesimus means "useful". Paul uses a play on words here. He who should be profitable, but had been unprofitable, is now profitable.

What a wonder. This should remind us of how real salvation does make a person different.

Paul said Onesimus was "useful" to him also.

*Phm 12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:*

Paul is sending Onesimus away. Onesimus will bring this letter to Philemon. Paul asks that he receive Onesimus gladly.

Paul lets us know how much he loved Onesimus. When he says "mine own bowels", he is referring to the love he has for Onesimus.

Even though Onesimus would have been a blessing to Paul, he knew the right thing was to send him back to Philemon.

Paul admits that his first thought had been to keep Onesimus with him.

*Phm 13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:*

No doubt, having someone like Onesimus would have been a blessing to a person in prison. To have another Christian to talk to, having someone who would assist you in ways that others wouldn't. Paul certainly couldn't expect to be treated well by the guards.

Paul's thoughts about keeping Onesimus were not just for his comfort. Onesimus could have been a tremendous aid to Paul for the gospel. He could have been another mouthpiece in Paul's attempt to tell everyone he could about the saving grace of God.

However, Paul would not do anything without Philemon's consent.

*Phm 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.*

Paul was careful to not offend fellow believers. He did not want there to be even a chance that Philemon might feel ill towards him.

Also, Paul realized the importance of restitution. Onesimus owed Philemon. The Christian thing was for him to return and repay his debt. Philemon certainly had the option of forgiving Onesimus' debt, but that was a decision that could be made only by Philemon. Paul did not have the right to force this upon Philemon.

Paul recognizes how God brings good out of evil.

*Phm 15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;*

God used Onesimus' sinful actions to bring him to the place where he recognized he was a sinner and needed forgiveness. Until a person recognizes their sinful condition, they will not get saved. Onesimus' sinful deeds brought him to this place. Like most, Onesimus had to get to the bottom before he would turn to the Lord.

Certainly, God did not cause Onesimus to steal from Philemon, but he was not the first one whom God allowed to live as they pleased, until they reached the bottom.

This was not the first time God had allowed a person to suffer the results of their sin. How many of us could testify to the fact that we paid dearly for our actions? And yet, God used those horrible circumstances to open our eyes and bring us to himself. Thank the Lord for old time conviction. Thank the Lord for the pain that sin brings. That pain caused us to realize the cost of living without God. If you doubt that, just ask the prodigal son.

*Phm 16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?*

Paul says Onesimus can return now, not as a servant, but as a brother.

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as a runaway slave, but as a brother in Christ.

It is assumed by most that Onesimus had been one of Philemon's slaves. Paul calls upon the compassion of Philemon by saying he should receive him, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

The bible does not approve, nor condemn, the practice of slavery. It does give instructions about how slaves should be treated, and how slaves should live (Deut. 15:12-15; Eph.6:9; Col. 4:1).

We must recognize the fact that slavery was different in bible times than the slavery we usually think about. Slavery was not a practice that was confined to one particular race. In bible times, slavery was practiced mostly because of economics. People sold themselves as slaves to pay a debt they had been unable to pay. Some sold themselves as slaves to provide for their families. Some actually chose to become slaves so that their needs might be provided for.

I'm certainly not saying the Lord was pleased with slavery. Even though slavery had some positive aspects, it could also be brutal. Some slaves were mistreated terribly. They were considered the property of the owner. They were bought or sold at the digression of the owner.

The bible condemns any mistreatment because of race or skin color. God created all men equal (Gen. 1:27).

The bible condemns what is commonly called "*man stealing*" (Ex. 21:16). The gathering of people to be used as slaves, as was done in Africa, is an abomination to God.

This letter reveals the impact the gospel was having on the society of their day. Paul did not attack slavery but he does show forth the changes the gospel can make. To attack slavery at this point would have been unwise and unsuccessful. But, as we will see, dealing with the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was both, beneficial and successful.

We must realize also, the bible was not written in an attempt to reform society. It was written to bring salvation to those who do not know the Lord. Because of this, the Bible remains silent about several social issues. Slavery won't be an issue when a person receives the gospel message and gets saved.

I believe this should speak to us all in our day. If we will concentrate on winning the lost, the social ills of our world will take care of themselves.

Instead of trying to get the bar closed down, let's win the bar owner to the Lord. Then, he will close the bar himself.

Phm 17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

Paul calls on Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would himself. Paul says if you count me as a friend, receive Onesimus. Receive Onesimus as you would receive me.

## **5. THE PROMISE FOUND IN THIS LETTER vv. 18-25**

Paul makes a promise to Philemon. He will pay for what Onesimus stole.

We find Paul putting himself in the place of Onesimus. This will not be the last time he does this in his letter.

Paul's next comment gives us a wonderful insight into substitution and imputation.

Substitution means to stand in the place of. Paul was willing to be a substitute for Onesimus. He is willing to stand in the place of Onesimus.

*Phm 18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;*

Paul knew Onesimus had wronged Philemon. There was never a question about his guilt. But, Paul still says he will be willing to pay whatever Onesimus owes. Whatever it took to make it right, Paul was willing.

What a wonderful reminder of our Lord. He was willing to stand in our place. He took our sin upon himself.

Is 53:4 *Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows....*

Is 53:5 *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities....*

Imputation means to apply to the account of. Paul said, "*put that on mine account*". He was willing to pay Onesimus' bill.

Imputation has a vital part in salvation.

FIRST, ADAM'S SIN WAS IMPUTED TO ALL MANKIND.

This means we all are sinners (Rom.5:12,17,19).

SECONDLY, OUR SIN WAS IMPUTED TO JESUS' ACCOUNT.

Jesus was willing to take our sin upon himself. Our sin was placed on him as he hung on the cross (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24; Rom. 5:19; 1 Cor. 15:22).

There is no way we can begin to comprehend what that meant to Jesus. He was the pure, and holy, Son of God. He had no sin of his own. I'm convinced this was one of the things that hurt Jesus the most as he hung in our place. But, he willingly drank all the bitter dregs of sin.

THIRDLY, JESUS' RIGHTEOUSNESS IS IMPUTED TO THE ACCOUNT OF EVERY BELIEVER.

Jesus' righteousness is applied to every sinner who accepts his salvation (Rom. 4:5, 21; 1 Cor.15:22; Jam. 2:23).

*Phm 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*

Paul confirms what has been written is from him and he will do as he has said.

We certainly see how personal this letter is. It's between two Christians who care greatly for each other. It's important enough for Paul to write it with his own hand. Paul usually had someone else pen his letters. Most people believe this was because of an eye problem that made it difficult for him to write (Gal. 4:15; Gal. 6:11)

Paul pulls at the heart of Philemon by mentioning how Philemon owes him a great deal. Paul had doubtless been the one who led Philemon to the Lord. What he was asking was a small request considering this fact.

Phm 20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.

*Paul asks Philemon to give him the joy of knowing he did the right thing concerning Onesimus.*

Knowing Philemon did as he requested would be a blessing to Paul. It would have been a blessing because it was the right thing to do. However, it would have been a special blessing because it would confirm to Paul that one of his converts was walking with the Lord.

One of the greatest joys of any servant of the Lord is to see maturity in the lives of those they have ministered to. One of the greatest heartbreaks of any servant of the Lord is to see immaturity in the lives of those they have ministered to. Paul grieved because the Galatians had not matured as he had hoped (Gal.4:20).

*Phm 21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*

Paul knew Philemon well enough to expect him to do the right thing. He says he has confidence that Philemon will obey.

He knows Philemon will do what he asks, and more. Maybe Paul has the idea that Philemon will release Onesimus from slavery.

*Phm 22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.*

Paul asks Philemon to prepare a place for him to lodge.

Paul was making plans in case he was released from prison. Part of his plan included visiting Philemon if the Lord so led.

He recognizes the method whereby his release will be accomplished. That being, prayer. Oh, the power of the praying saint.

Most likely, this letter was written a short time before Paul was released from prison.

Paul mentions some who send a greeting to Philemon also.

*Phm 23-24 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.*

Paul mentions Epaphras here and in Colossians 4:12. He was a servant of the Lord in the church at Colossi. Paul calls him his "*fellowprisoner*". He must have been in prison with Paul at some point but we don't know the circumstances of his imprisonment.

Marcus, also called John Mark, was the man with who Paul had differences. John Mark had left Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts. 13:13). John Mark recovered from his temporary desertion and served God faithfully. Paul would later ask that he join them in their service (2 Tim.4:11).

Aristarchus was a Macedonian of Thessalonica (Acts 27:2). He went with Paul to Rome.

Paul mentions Demas also in Colossians 4:12. He would forsake Paul having loved the world (2 Tim.4:10).

Lucas also called Luke the beloved physician in Colossians 4:14. Luke penned the books of Luke and the book of Acts.

Paul calls these men, his "*fellowlabourers*".

This wonderful letter concludes with personal greetings among friends. What a delight it is to know, that with all the problems we face as we serve the Lord, in the end, we are family.

Phm 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul ends his letter as he began. He ends with the one thing they all needed more than any other thing, that is, God's grace.

Paul, like no one else, had experienced the grace of God. And, he recommends it to all of us. And, if I say so myself, Paul had it right. We need God's grace to make it through each day. We need God's grace to keep going when we want to quit. We need God's grace to help us appreciate all the blessings he gives us daily.

May I echo what Paul said, may the grace of God be with you all.

#### THIS LETTER TEACHES REPENTANCE

Onesimus repented of his sin (11). He stole from Philemon. He admitted it, he confessed, and turned from it.

Repentance is a vital part of the gospel message.

#### THIS LETTER TEACHES REGENERATION

Onesimus didn't turn over a new leaf. He got saved by grace (v. 10).

#### THIS LETTER TEACHES RESTITUTION

Onesimus went back to Philemon. He was willing to pay back what he owed. Even though Paul agreed to pay what he owed, he was willing to pay himself.

#### THIS LETTER TEACHES RESTORATION

We can assume that Onesimus was restored by Philemon.

And so, we conclude our thoughts on the book of Philemon. May our walk through this book make a difference in our daily walk with our Lord.