Philemon*

Philemon 1:1-3 (1) Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,
(2) And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:
(3) Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Have you ever read the book of Philemon? If so, did you benefit from doing so? Is there an enrichment for each one of us in this short letter? Actually, this epistle has tremendous value for us today because, in a certain sense, it is the story of our lives as well. The slave, who had stolen, betrayed, and run from his master, had been turned around by the power of the gospel! While you may not have thought about it, there is a very real sense in which this speaks of our lives, for all of humanity are slaves to sin until they find the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin (John 8:34
This one-chapter epistle of Paul to Philemon is unique among Paul's epistles in that it was not addressed to a Church, but to a minister of Christ living in or near Colosse. Philemon was a friend and convert of Paul's (verse 19), who at this time was using his own house as a meeting place for a local church. Philemon is one of three "prison epistles", the others being Ephesians and Colossians, written by Paul during his house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30), and were delivered by Tychicus. Onesimus also accompanied Tychicus as he carried the letters into Asia. Philemon is a personal letter. It does not give advice on how Christians should live together as a church. It does not contain any of the usual things that are in a New Testament letter. So why is this letter so important and why is it included in the Bible? It does seem strange that such a short personal letter is in the New Testament. We want to

know why it is there. And we want to know how it can help Christians today. Paul wrote this letter to a certain person called Philemon. It is about another person called Onesimus. Paul was writing about a certain situation. An early church leader called Ignatius wrote many letters. In one letter, he refers to someone called Onesimus. He describes this Onesimus as the Bishop of Ephesus. (A bishop is the leader of the church in a certain area.) Ignatius' letter is not in the New Testament, but many scholars believe the Onesimus in Ignatius' letter and the Onesimus in Paul's letter are the same person. If this is true, then Onesimus's life changed completely because his conversion to Christ and of course, Paul's letter. Onesimus was a slave. He had run away. He should have been punished, instead, he received mercy and believed to become a church leader. Now while this is not certain fact, many scholars have this opinion and perhaps that is why such a private letter is in the Bible. The connection of Tychics and Onesimus is stated in;

Colossians 4:7-9 (7) All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord:

(8) Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts;

(9) With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.

The significance of epistle greetings goes beyond identifying the author and audience; it is more than saying hello. The author's salutation, however conventional and formal, specifies the nature of the relationship between the author and audience and even draws lines around the conversation being carried on by the letter in hand. Meanings are more readily and rightly determined in terms of this "rhetorical relationship" formulated by the letter's opening words. Thus, Philemon and the others mentioned in verse 2 hear the

following request for Onesimus' restoration in terms given by Paul, whose importance, and therefore the legitimacy of his appeal, is made clear by his opening self-introduction: the author is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. It is a claim so important to Paul's purpose that he repeats it three times in this very short letter. In his epistolary greetings, Paul's view of his addressees largely determines what is said to them and how they are treated. Paul views Philemon as a trusted and dear colleague and treats him as a peer and friend. Precisely this same attitude undergirds Paul's request that Philemon view the slave Onesimus as a brother and partner in faith. Paul wants to convince Philemon to do the right thing. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and this was wrong. But Onesimus has come to Paul. He has been useful to Paul. Paul wants to keep Onesimus with him so he can help him. But he must ask Philemon to agree to this, otherwise, it would not be right. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon so he can ask for his freedom. Then, Onesimus would not be a slave. However, Onesimus must ask Philemon to send him back so he could continue and work with Paul.

With Paul in Rome was Onesimus the slave (verse 16), he belonged to Philemon who was a wealthy citizen of Colosse, and a prominent member of the Church there. Onesimus was still a heathen when he defrauded his master and ran off from Colossi. He found his way to Rome, where evil men tended to flock as to a common center, as Tacitus tells us they did at that period. In Rome he came into contact with Paul, who was then in his own hired house, in military custody. What brought him into contact with Paul we do not know. It may have been hunger; it may have been the pangs of conscience. Perhaps he could not forget that his master's house in Colossi was the place where the Christians met in their weekly assemblies for breaking bread and worship. Perhaps he could not forget how Philemon had many times spoken of Paul, to whom he owed his conversion. Now that Onesimus was in

Rome--what a strange coincidence--Paul also was in Rome. The result of their meeting was that Onesimus was converted to Christ, through the instruction of the apostle of whom he declaired, my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds, (verse 10). *When Paul wrote to the Church in Colossi on other matters, he entrusted the Epistle to the joint care of Tychicus and Onesimus. The apostle recommends Onesimus to the brethren in Colossi, as a* faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you, *and he goes on to say that Tychicus and Onesimus will make known to them all things that have happened to Paul in Rome. Such a commendation would greatly facilitate' Onesimus's return to Colossi. But Paul does more. He furnishes Onesimus with a letter written by himself to Philemon. Returning to a city where it was well known that he had been neither a Christian nor an honest man, he needed someone to vouch for the change which had taken place in his life. And Paul does this for him both in the Epistle to the Colossians and in the letter to Philemon.* Receive him, *says the apostle,* for he is my own very heart (verse 12). *The man whom the Colossians had only known hitherto, if they knew him at all, was as a worthless runaway slave, but is now commended to them no more a slave, but a brother, no more dishonest and faithless, but trustworthy, no more an object of contempt but of love. The apostle accordingly begs Philemon to give Onesimus the same reception as he would give to himself. The past history of Onesimus had been such as to belie the meaning of his name. He had not been "profitable"--far from it. But already his consistent conduct in Rome and his willing service to Paul have changed all that; he has been profitable to Paul, and he will be profitable to Philemon too. Paul's Guarantee; Onesimus had evidently stolen his master's goods before leaving Colossi, but in regard to that the apostle writes:* Put that to mine account, *are his words,* I will repay it. *Had Philemon not been a Christian, and had Paul not written this most beautiful letter, Onesimus*

might well have been afraid to return. In the Roman empire slaves were crucified for smaller offenses than those of which he was guilty. A thief and a runaway had nothing but torture or death to expect. But now under the sway of Christ all is changed. The letter, which is delivered to Philemon by his slave, is written by a bound "prisoner of Jesus Christ." The slave too is now a brother in Christ, beloved by Paul: surely he will be beloved by Philemon also. Then Paul intimates that he hopes soon to be set free, and then he will come and visit them in Colossi. Will Philemon receive him into his house as his guest? It cannot be imagined that this appeal in behalf of Onesimus was in vain. Surly Philemon would do more than Paul asked, he must have known of Christ's parable in Luke ch. 7.

Most men and women we have read and studied about in the Bible have been people who have accomplished great works for God. Some of them like Barnabas, Apollos, and James gained prominent recognition as Christian leaders in their own day. Others, like Aquila and Priscilla, Eunice and Lois, and Luke have worked quietly behind the scenes, simply being witnesses for Christ to those among their family and friends who don't yet know Him, being encouragement for those who do, and serving with little public recognition. The gentleman whom we are studying this morning, is one of those behind the scenes. But quite unlike other heroes of faith, there is not one significant accomplishment recorded about him in history except the account of Ignatius and none in scripture. But in many respects, this man Onesimus became a model and an example for us all. Now turn with me to;

Philemon 1:8-16 (8) Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
(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.
(10) I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

(11) Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:
(12) Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:
(13) Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:
(14) But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.
(15) For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;
(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?
The story of Onesimus is the sole subject of one entire book of the Bible, the New Testament book of Philemon. If you have trouble finding the book of Philemon in your Bible, that is because some have referred to Philemon as a postcard. What we gather from Paul's greeting to Philemon and his greetings to the Colossians is that Paul was in prison. And it seems he has a pile of parchment, because he dictates at least three letters: One to be sent to the church in the city of Colossi. A second letter was as a private letter to Philemon, whose home served as the meeting place of the Colossian church. And the third letter was sent to the church in nearby Ephesus. We infer from the message of this letter that Onesimus was Philemon's servant, or more likely, a slave. Onesimus had run away, and had taken something of value from Philemon. Somehow, someway, Onesimus met up with Paul. Lest we get bent out of shape about the impropriety of a Christian owning slaves, keep in mind that Philemon was at first a wealthy man who owned property and slaves, and then he became a Christian. Slavery was common in the Roman world, and Paul had not made it his mission to abolish slavery as a social institution. But he did make it his mission to change the way that Christian slaves and Christian slave owners relate with

each other. Paul was more concerned first with the eternal salvation for both slaves and masters. And second he was concerned that both slaves and masters displayed Christian love and respect for one another. The Christian congregations which Paul started were often made up of a large number of slaves, and occasionally slave owners. And he made it abundantly clear that standing before the cross of Jesus, the ground is level, turn with me to;

Philemon 1:17-22 (17) If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.
(18) If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;
(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.
(20) Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.
(21) Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.
(22) But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.

Paul often identified himself with the slave-class of society, when he described himself as a bond-servant, or an indentured slave of Christ, which alludes to one of the two ways a person usually became a slave: The first way to become a slave was to be captured in battle. We read about such a one in the Old Testament, a Jewish girl captured by the Syrians and taken as a slave for Naaman, where she brought her faith in God and healing to that house (2Kings 5:2). The other way to become a slave was to find yourself or your family so deep in debt that you contracted your service for a specific length of time. And when your time of service was up, you were free from your obligation. Under Jewish law, slaves had to be freed after seven years of service. And while they served, they had many of the same rights and privileges as other members of the

family whom they served. We do not know how or why Onesimus was a slave. Unlike the way slavery was practiced in this country 150 years ago, under Roman rule one did not automatically become a slave because he/she was born to a parent in slavery. So whether he was captured in war, or he was working off the payment of a debt, we do not know. Regardless, Onesimus was driven by his sense of injustice that had been perpetrated against him. And given the opportunity to steal and run, he found ample justification in his own mind for doing just that, just as we often do when we are faced with unfair circumstances and perhaps we remedy the situation by our own clever, less than honest means. Onesimus didn't live in Israel. He was not protected by Jewish law, but was subject to Roman law, which meant for his crimes of stealing and escape, he could be punished with death. In his letter to Philemon, Paul indicates that Onesimus left his master's house as an unbeliever. He is returning as a Christian, seeking forgiveness, and restoration of his relationship with Philemon. And he carries in his hand the letter which Paul wrote to his master, appealing to Philemon's heart as a Christian. As I read this, I can't help picturing a similar scene from the Old Testament, 1000 years earlier, where an army officer is carrying a letter given to him by the king whom he loves and trust, to deliver to the general in command, unaware that the contents of the letter were instructions for arranging his own murder. The letter Uriah delivered for David to Joab was Uriah's own death sentence. What a contrast was the letter that Onesimus carried, on whom legally was the sentence of death, but the letter he carried was very literally for him the word of life. And so is Christ for us, the Word of Life. What Onesimus experienced that day was pure grace... and pure grace is what we as Christians experienced in our deliverance.
Commentators generally point out that Onesimus' return to Philemon was to "make restitution" for the wrong he had done.

But notice that Paul never once suggested that Onesimus pay back his master for what he stole. Paul says, rather, that Philemon can hold Paul responsible for paying it back. Then Paul, in good Jewish fashion tells Philemon, "Oh, by the way, I could remind you that you owe me your very life.... but I won't." It was Paul who first introduced Philemon to Jesus. Now, several years later, Paul has the joy and privilege in introducing Philemon's runaway servant, Onesimus, to Jesus. And Paul has the joy of restoring the two to fellowship, not as slave and master, but as equals, as brothers in Christ. Did Philemon forgive Onesimus? Did he receive him back into his fellowship? The Bible doesn't say. However, would we be having this public reading of this private letter if Philemon had failed to react in the Christian way? The life of Onesimus is much like the lives of all who live on the earth. All were servants to sin and ran away from the master, Jesus Christ. Some, like Onesimus ran into the master; But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you (Romans 6:17). *This is the state of every poor, miserable sinner; he is the slave of Satan, and his own evil lusts and appetites are his most cruel task-masters. The same word is applied to the servants of Christ, the more forcibly to show that they are their Master's property; and that, as He is infinitely good and benevolent, therefore His service must be perfect freedom. Indeed, He exacts no obedience from them which He does not turn to their eternal advantage. The pleasure of sin do not deserve to be called fruit. Sinners are but ploughing iniquity, sowing vanity, and reaping the same. The end of sin is death, altho the way may seem pleasant and inviting, yet it will be bitterness in the end. From this condemnation the obedient believer is set at liberty, and free from sin. If the fruit is unto holiness, if there be an active principle of true and growing grace, the end will be everlasting life. The gift of God is eternal life. And this gift*

is through Jesus Christ our Lord. Christ purchased it, prepared it, prepares us for it, preserves us to it; He is the All in all in our salvation. He said; Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (Matthew 7:13-14). *There is an illustration that if you look through red coloured glass, then everything is red. If you look through blue coloured glass, then everything is blue. Well, when God looks at His children, He does so through the pure white purity of His Son Jesus… and they are white as snow! And, when Satan tries to accuse the brethren before God, the Lord Jesus stands for us, saying 'that has been charged to my account!' The receipt stated that;* *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved (Mark 1616).* *Baptism is one subject the Devil has adjusted to advance his own protocol more than any other, for baptism is the final protocol to be obeyed in the salvation sequence and effect addition into the Church of Christ. It has been said that "Baptism has become the Devil's workshop" and that saying is well justified! For if he can divert one to believe, "baptism is not necessary", the devil has won and the person has lost. The devil is a noteworthy adversary, however he can be defeated by faith. What is faith? Faith in Christ is the effect of belief, and baptism is the effect of faith; only those who first believe the testimony of God, and by faith repent of their sins, and by faith confess Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and by faith are baptized for remission of sin, have the full and explicit testimony of pardon. This is the gospel. If you have not enjoyed its invitation why not do so now, or if there are prayer requests, in either case come while we gently persuade with song.*

This message approved by
Jack Warford

a minister for Christ

New Defender's Study Bible Notes

Philemon--Introduction to Philemon

The one-chapter epistle of Paul to Philemon is unique among Paul's epistles in that it was addressed to neither a church nor a pastor but to a prominent layman living in or near Colosse. Philemon was a friend and convert of Paul's (Philemon 19), who at this time even was using his own house as a meeting place for a local church (Philemon 2). Paul was writing on behalf of Onesimus, who had been a slave of Philemon's, but had run away to Rome. Onesimus had met Paul in Rome, who had led him to Christ (Philemon 10). Paul was now sending him back to his master as a Christian brother (Philemon 16), with the inference that he should be set free, possibly to help Paul in the ministry (Philemon 13).

This is one of three "prison epistles" (the others being Ephesians and Colossians) written by Paul during his house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30), and delivered by Tychicus. Evidently Onesimus accompanied Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7-9) as he carried the three letters to Asia.

The act of sending Onesimus back to Philemon with the request that he be received as a brother beloved, with the offer to repay any debt incurred by the flight of Onesimus, gives a unique insight into the character of Paul. It was not politically expedient in that day to argue for the abolition of slavery, but a brotherly relation between master and slave would render it almost meaningless. In fact, this little epistle was widely used centuries later for the very purpose of promoting the abolition of slavery in Christian countries.

Perhaps this is one reason why the Holy Spirit inspired such a short and personal letter and led to its incorporation in the canon of Scripture. In any case, the epistle of Philemon has always been accepted both as Pauline and as canonical by all scholars, even by liberal critics.

Philemon :1

1 prisoner. The letter to Philemon, like that to Ephesus and Colosse, was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Timothy was with him, though not himself a prisoner. See note on Colossians 1:1. All three letters were probably carried by the same messenger, probably Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-8), along with Onesimus (Colossians 4:9; Philemon 10).

Philemon :1 "Philemon" (meaning "friendly one") evidently lived in Colosse, though his name is not mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians. He was evidently well-to-do, with Onesimus having been his slave, and with the ability to provide lodging for Paul (Philemon 10,16,22).

Philemon :2 "Apphia" was a common woman's name. She probably was the wife of Philemon and mother of Archippus. Archippus was also a pastor; however, it is not certain whether he pastored in Laodicea or Colosse or both (Colossians 4:16-17). It is possible he simply pastored a congregation meeting in Philemon's home.

Philemon :2 church in thy house. Philemon had a church meeting in his house in Colosse, and so did Nymphas (Colossians 4:15), probably at Laodicea. Perhaps there were others.

Philemon :6 the communication. The Greek word for "communication" here is koinonia, meaning "fellowship." The word for "effectual" is energes, meaning "energizing." Thus true Christian fellowship becomes powerful when it is not mere socializing, but rather a time of thankfulness and sharing. In context here, it might cost Onesimus his freedom, Paul his helper and Philemon his property.

Philemon :7 bowels of the saints. See note on Philippians 2:1 on this usage of "bowels." See also Philemon 12 and 20.
Philemon :9 Paul the aged. Paul could hardly have been older than in his early sixties by this time, but the vicissitudes of his travels and many persecutions may well have aged him prematurely. No doubt he would like to have retained Onesimus as a helper (Philemon 13), but would not do it because of the greater need to maintain a strong testimony of being void of any real or imagined offense to others, especially Philemon (note Acts 24:16).
Philemon :10 my son Onesimus. Paul called Onesimus "my son" because he had led him to Christ, just as he had Timothy (II Timothy 1:2), Titus (Titus 1:4), and even Philemon (Philemon 19). Before that, Onesimus had been one of Philemon's servants (actually "bondservant" or "slave"), and had run away, apparently stealing from his master as he did (Philemon 18). As a born-again Christian now, however, Onesimus wished to return to his master and make amends, and Paul encouraged him. Every new Christian, to the extent it is possible, should similarly seek to redress any wrongs of which he had been guilty before his conversion.
Philemon :11 unprofitable. Onesimus actually means "profitable," so Paul is making an effective play on words here.
Philemon :16 above a servant. The Scriptures did not condemn slavery as such, but rather taught a new relationship between masters and servants (e.g., Colossians 3:22–4:1; Ephesians 6:5-9), considering both as brothers and fellowservants of Christ. The institution of slavery, therefore, gradually became more of an employer-employee relationship, with its compulsory aspects eventually being displaced altogether.
Philemon :17 partner. Paul thus placed himself on the same plane with both Philemon and Onesimus, that of "partners," a term implying full fellowship. Here he requests Philemon also to accept Onesimus on that basis.
Philemon :18 on mine account. Paul, by his own signature, offers to repay anything Onesimus owed Philemon (Philemon 19). This is a striking human application of the divine principles of imputation (Romans 4:4-8), and substitution (II Corinthians 5:21). Onesimus was unable to pay his debt, just as we are unable to satisfy our own debt of sin against our Maker. Paul, however, was willing to pay the price because of his love for his young convert, just as the Lord Jesus Christ "loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).
Philemon :23 Epaphras. Epaphras was evidently from Colosse (Colossians 4:12), but had been serving with Paul, possibly even in prison himself.
Philemon :24 Marcus. Mark had once left Paul (Acts 13:13), but apparently was now back with him at Rome. Aristarchus was a Macedonian convert from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2) who later worked with Paul.
Philemon :24 Demas. Demas and Luke, especially the latter, were often with Paul in his earlier ministries. Demas, however, later defected and went back into the world (II Timothy 4:10), while Luke, the beloved physician, stayed with Paul to the end (Colossians 4:14; II Timothy 4:11). Whether any of these men knew Philemon personally is not certain, but at least they wanted to join Paul in his greetings to him.

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