

Title: “The Epistle of Paul to Philemon – The Story of Onesimus”

Key verse: Philemon 10-11 (ESV) – “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.”

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Today, I would like to share a message with you from the Epistle of Paul to Philemon. This letter is only one chapter long, and I think most of us pay little attention to it. When was the last time you heard a message on the Epistle to Philemon? We don’t hear this letter mentioned very often, though I did do a sermon on it a couple years ago. Today, I would like to speak on this letter again.

This man named Philemon was an important person in the church in the city of Colossae. In fact, the church in Colossae met in Philemon’s home. By the way, you have heard of this city before – one of the other epistles in the New Testament is the one written to the church of the Colossians. I will be quoting from both of these epistles today.

Let’s read the Epistle to Philemon, verses 1-3 (NIV) – “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

I’m going to spend a few minutes giving you the historical background to this letter and the church at Colossae. And the first thing I notice in verse 1 is that Paul calls himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Paul is in prison at the time he is writing this letter. This letter is classified as one of the “Prison Epistles,” written while Paul was in prison. There are four “Prison Epistles” – they are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. In each of these letters, Paul indicates that he is in prison. He was imprisoned several times, and we are not sure during which imprisonment he wrote these letters, but scholars think it is likely they were written during his two years as a prisoner in Rome, which is recorded at the end of the book of Acts. So, these letters were probably written around the year AD 62. He is allowed to have visitors during this time, and so his faithful co-worker Timothy is often with him. Paul says the letter is from both he and Timothy, but clearly, the primary author is Paul, since through most of this letter, he uses the personal pronoun “I.”

Also in verse 1 we see to whom this epistle is addressed. It is addressed to Philemon, who is described as their dear friend and fellow worker. So, apparently, Paul and Timothy and Philemon had labored together for the spread of the gospel at some point in the past.

Verse 2 mentions Apphia, a sister. This is most likely Philemon’s wife. The next person mentioned is Archippus, who is called a “fellow soldier.” It is thought that he may be the son of Philemon and Apphia. But he is more than just a son in this household. The word “soldier” suggests an important role in the gospel ministry, and so some scholars suggest that he may have been the pastor or some other leader in the church at Colossae. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul tells this to the church in Colossians 4:17 (ESV) – “And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’” Archippus must have had some important ministry role in Colossae and Paul wants to make sure that the man fulfills it by calling on the church to encourage him to do so.

Notice also in verse 2 that this epistle is additionally addressed to the church which meets in Philemon’s home. It was common in the early years of Christianity for the congregation to meet in private homes, usually the home of a wealthy believer who had a house large enough to host church meetings. This letter is mostly a private letter to the man hosting the church, but the letter is expected to be shared with the whole church there.

Let me continue my historical introduction by mentioning one other person. Let's look at verse 23, as Paul is making some closing remarks at the end of the letter. He writes, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings." Epaphras is in prison with Paul at this moment in time. And he is somebody special to the church at Colossae because this is where he is from. Let's look at Colossians 4:12-13 (NIV) – "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ¹³ I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis." Epaphras is said to be "one of you," meaning he comes from this congregation in Colossae.

Verse 13 mentions the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Let me show you a map on the PowerPoint screen. In what is now western Turkey, you can see the three cities of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. They are in the ancient province known as Asia, along with Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Sardis. You'll find several of these churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. Ephesus was an extremely important city in this region, and the Apostle Paul spent some fruitful time there.



[Source of this map: Biblical Archaeology Society Online Archive: <https://www.baslibrary.org/images/bsba4502060041jpg>]

At the beginning of his third missionary journey, the Apostle Paul came to the city of Ephesus. That was around the year AD 52. In Acts 19:1 (NIV) we read this – "While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples." When he passed through the inland portion of the province of Asia, it's possible that he passed through Colossae or the neighboring cities, but we don't know for sure.

In verse 8 we read this about the beginning of his ministry in Ephesus: "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God."

And then in verse 10 we read: "This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." For two years, Paul and his fellow workers spread the gospel in Ephesus with such effectiveness that everyone in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

It was probably at this time that Philemon and his family heard and embraced the gospel. We don't know if Paul traveled to Colossae or if Philemon traveled to Ephesus, but we know that they met at some point.

Let's return to the Epistle to Philemon. Look at the end of verse 19, where Paul says to Philemon: "you owe me your very self." It was Paul himself who led Philemon to the Lord. Paul desires to remind Philemon that he owes his spiritual life and eternal destiny to Paul. Paul says this to

Philemon because he has a very special request to make of him. That special request is the heart of this epistle, and we will soon get to it. But first, let us continue reading Paul's greetings to Philemon and his family and the church meeting in their home.

Verses 3-7 (NIV) – “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.”

Many of Paul's letters contain similar greetings and expressions of thankfulness. Grace and peace – two key elements of both Old Testament and New Testament teaching. Paul says he includes Philemon in his prayers – in fact, if we look at all of Paul's epistles, he is always remembering many different individuals in his prayers. This reminds us that we all should be diligent in our prayers for our Christian brethren and anyone else we care about.

In verse 5, Paul commends Philemon for his love for God's people and his faith in Christ. In verse 6 he fondly recalls his partnership with Philemon in furthering the gospel and prays that it will lead to a deepening understanding of everything they share in the Lord. In verse 7, Paul notes the joy and encouragement he has received from Philemon, and then states how Philemon has refreshed the hearts of his fellow Christians.

This last statement is made as a transition to the next part of the letter, the heart of the epistle: Paul's request that he makes of Philemon. Let's continue reading.

Verses 8-11 (NIV) – “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”

Paul was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. With such a divinely appointed position, he could have asserted his authority and ordered Philemon to carry out a certain task related to this man named Onesimus. However, in verse 9 Paul says he desires to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love, Christian love, agape love, which is self-sacrificial love.

Who is this man Onesimus and why is Paul making such a strong appeal to Philemon? In verse 10, Paul calls this man his son – not his biological son, but his spiritual son. It was while a prisoner that Paul led this man Onesimus to salvation in Christ. By the way, the name Onesimus means useful or profitable. Paul uses the meaning of this man's name to make an interesting point to Philemon. In verse 11, Paul says, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” The man who was named Useful had become Useless to Philemon. In fact, this man had been a slave owned by Philemon, but he was a runaway slave – he had escaped from his master Philemon. Through a divinely appointed set of circumstances, Onesimus ends up meeting Paul in prison, the man who had led Philemon to the Lord. And in prison Paul led Onesimus to the Lord. The slave who had become useless to his master Philemon now became a new creature in Christ and had become useful for the Kingdom of God, useful to Paul, useful – potentially – to even his former master Philemon.

I can't help seeing a parallel here with a memorable story in the book of Genesis, when Jacob's son Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt by his jealous brothers. It was God's plan to bring about a

deliverance to Jacob and his family when famine hit their land and they needed food. Through a divinely appointed set of circumstances, Joseph went from being a slave to being a prisoner to being the prime minister of Egypt overseeing the food stores. When Joseph later revealed himself to his brothers, he said to them in Genesis 45:5-8 (NIV) – “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

And now, in a prison far away from Colossae, Paul leads to salvation the runaway slave of his former co-laborer in the work of the gospel, Philemon. And this slave who was once deemed useless has now experienced the new birth and has become a useful brother in the Lord. Paul loves his spiritual son, a man who has proven helpful to him while in prison. But rather than keep him close by, Paul sends him back to where he belongs, back to the household of his master – no longer as a useless slave, but as a Christian brother. Nevertheless, in that society, this man is a slave and he is owned by a wealthy man, and back to his owner he should go.

Paul makes a special request to his dear friend and fellow worker Philemon. Let’s look again at the epistle, in verse 9. Paul makes his request to Philemon on the basis of agape love. But then he adds two more points in order to appeal to Philemon’s humanity. Paul states that he is an old man and that he is a prisoner because of being a gospel minister. In fact, in verse 1 of this letter, Paul doesn’t refer to himself as an apostle of Christ (like he does in his other epistles) but calls himself a prisoner of Christ, deliberately lowering his own status. Martin Luther makes an interesting comment here. Luther said: “Paul empties himself of his rights [in order] to compel Philemon also to waive his rights.” Philemon had the right to have his slave back and he had the right to punish his slave severely. Paul hopes that Philemon will waive those rights and not punish the slave and instead welcome him back as a brother in Christ. So when Paul makes his request, he does not use his status as an apostle to order Philemon to do what he wants – instead, he empties himself of his rank and puts stress on his present lowly state: an old man in prison. And appeals to Philemon to voluntarily choose to act on the basis of Christian love and show mercy.

Let’s move on to the next part of this epistle, verses 12-16 (NIV) – “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”

Onesimus is very dear to Paul ... but Onesimus had a much longer relationship to Philemon than he had with Paul. And so, if Onesimus were to return to his master, there is a potential that their relationship could deepen now that they are Christian brothers.

As a slave owner, Philemon would be in a position to free this slave. That is not necessarily what Paul is asking for, but the potential is there. More importantly, their slave/master relationship is now transformed because they are now brothers.

Let’s read Galatians 3:28 (NIV) – “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

And Colossians 3:11 (NIV) – “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

As fellow believers in Christ, we are all one people – there is no longer a racial or class or gender distinction. Of course, the physical realities of our race and gender are not erased, but these are not taken into account when we stand before our Lord.

Let's also look at 1 Corinthians 12:13 (NIV) – “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

Every Christian, no matter what race or social status, has the Holy Spirit indwelling us.

Next, I'd like to look at a slightly different text. I have a fondness for the image this next verse gives us. James 1:9-10 (NIV) – “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower.”

I like this image. For those of us who are Christians, if you have come from humble circumstances, you can be happy that your Creator has raised you up to a high level to be in relationship with the Son of God. You are greatly valued by Him. On the other hand, if you are from a position of wealth and power, you should recognize that you are in a low position now, when you are compared with the creator of the universe. Even if you have worked hard to obtain your wealth and power, you should remember that it is God who gave you your ability and energy to obtain what you have gotten in this world. You should recognize your humble position before almighty God.

If someone is a slave, may he seek to be made free? Yes, if that can be done according to the norms of society, but you should not expect it to happen. 1 Corinthians 7:17-22 (NIV) – “Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so.²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave.”

Verse 21 – you should be content to remain a slave, but if a legitimate opportunity arises for freedom, then you may pursue that. Verse 22 reminds me of the verse from James that I read a moment ago. In the picture given to us here, the slave who becomes a Christian can be happy that he is free in Christ, and the person who is free should recognize that he is a slave of Christ, that his life belongs to the Lord and not to himself.

How should a Christian slave behave? 1 Timothy 6:1-2 (NIV) tells us – “All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.² Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare of their slaves. These are the things you are to teach and insist on.”

It is a matter of Christian testimony that a Christian slave respect their master. It is also a matter of Christian testimony that a Christian master treat his slaves with decency.

How does the story of Onesimus and Philemon turn out? We do not know, but I can imagine that they followed the principle I just outlined in 1st Timothy. I am sure that for a while at least, Onesimus continued serving his master as a slave. How long that lasted, I cannot say.

Let us continue reading the Epistle to Philemon. Verses 17-22 (NIV) – “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”

In verse 18, there is an indication that when Onesimus ran away, he probably stole some valuables from his master. So, here, Paul says that he himself will repay his dear friend Philemon for any amount that Onesimus stole. Paul ends his words with confidence that his dear friend and fellow worker will do the right thing. In fact, Paul even asks that a guest room be prepared for him. Indeed, scholars believe that after Paul was released from his two years of prison at the end of the book of Acts, he did travel back to this region.

Let’s read the closing lines of the epistle. Verses 23-25 (NIV) – “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” I told you about Epaphras near the beginning of today’s message. The other men mentioned in verse 24 here are mentioned in several other epistles written by Paul – they were evidently very special and faithful co-workers of his.

The first time I heard a message on the Epistle to Philemon, I was given an image of Onesimus arriving at Philemon’s house alone and with a letter in his hand from the Apostle Paul to give to his master. But, that is not the way that it happened. Let’s go back to the Epistle to the Colossians one more time. Before I read one more passage there, let me review something that I said earlier. I told you that there are four letters called Prison Epistles – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. The city of Philippi is in Greece. The other three epistles were addressed to Christians in the province of Asia. In fact, the letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were delivered by the same pair of faithful co-workers during the same journey.

Let’s read Colossians 4:7-9 (NIV) – “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹ He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.”

Here we meet Tychicus, another faithful co-worker of the Apostle Paul. You see him mentioned in Acts 20:4 and Ephesians 6:21-22. He has delivered a letter to Ephesus and now he is delivering letters to the Colossian church and to Philemon, as well as giving a verbal report about Paul and his ministry. And he is accompanied by Onesimus, who is said to be one of them, indicating that he is from Colossae. It is during this trip that Onesimus is reunited with his master, Philemon.

I am going to close my message in a few minutes. There is one more thought that I would like to share with you. We have three main characters in the Epistle to Philemon: Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul. And each of these men had to do something that they did not want to do. But it was the right thing to do.

Paul did not want to let go of his precious and useful spiritual son Onesimus. Onesimus was ministering to Paul and was useful in service. But legally, Onesimus was the property of his owner back in Asia. Paul had to send this man back to his owner and back into his owner's service.

Philemon was put into a difficult situation. As a wealthy man of stature in his community, if he shows any leniency to his runaway slave, he will receive criticism and possible ostracism from his social class. The runaway slave deserves some kind of punishment. If he escapes punishment, this would serve as a bad precedent and could encourage the slaves of other slave-owners to run away. But Onesimus is now Philemon's brother in the Lord, and he has received a personal appeal from the Apostle Paul himself. I am sure Philemon found an acceptable way to balance conflicting values, but I'm also sure he must have received some criticism. When we do the right thing in the eyes of the Lord, we will often get criticism from the eyes of the world.

And let's look at Onesimus. He also had to do something he didn't want to do. He had return to a position of slavery. That was what the law required. He had enjoyed freedom, but to do right, he had to return to his master. As we see from the story, this is indeed what he did. And a few minutes ago I read for you 1 Timothy 6:1-2, where Christian slaves are told to respect their masters ... and even more so if their master is a fellow believer. This is a matter of Christian testimony. I am sure Onesimus did so.

Let us remember to do the right thing in whatever decisions we are faced with. Do what will bring honor to our Lord. It may be a hard thing to do, but in the end we will have a better conscience and a better Christian testimony.