

# Philemon

THINK & LOVE & LIVE

Part 3: Paul



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## In Rome Philemon 1-25

I thank God for His Word. In this last part of our Philemon series, He invites us again to study His intricately beautiful and perfectly wise work in building His church on earth. Every one of us has a story—one we're in that is still unfolding. Today we focus on this letter's author's story.

Around 34AD, a man named Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus. He carried with him a document which gave him authority to hunt down and bring to trial anyone claiming to be a follower of Jesus. The idea behind this hunt was all his own.

But as "he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'" (Acts 9:3-6) Long story short, what he was to do was become Jesus' Apostle to the gentile world throughout the Roman Empire. So Saul took his Greek name, Paul, and spent the next 33 years of his life planting and nurturing churches throughout Asia Minor.

In 57AD, 23 years after his conversion, Paul went to Jerusalem where he was arrested for preaching. What followed was a series of arrests and trials that took him from Jerusalem to Rome where he was jailed in 62AD. There he was released and continued ministering in Rome until he was rearrested around 64AD. History suggests that arrest ended in his execution.

Over the later years of his life, Paul had seen and done it all. He had seen the Lord work miracles in people's lives. (Ac 15:12) He had been beaten and thrown in jail several times. (Ac 16:22, 21:27, 24:27) He had seen people rush to his aid (Phil 2:22) and he had seen them run for cover. (Ac 15:38) He had traveled extensively, proclaimed Christ, established churches, fought heresies and encouraged the faithful from one end of Asia Minor to the other.

Early in his ministry Paul wanted to preach Christ in Rome, the heart of the world. Though it would be as a prisoner, still, the old Apostle made it. With countless brothers and sisters who had come to Jesus through his ministry, even as a prisoner Paul was well loved. Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, found Paul presumably because of Paul's reputation for loving the lost. Onesimus came to faith in Christ and became like a son to Paul.

But both knew if Onesimus was now Philemon's brother in Christ, the two should be reconciled. Having played a part in Philemon's conversion, Paul wrote a short letter to go with Onesimus' return. Around 62AD, here are the words he wrote.

*<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup>and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>4</sup>I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, <sup>6</sup>and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. <sup>7</sup>For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*

*<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup>yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup>I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup>I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. <sup>15</sup>For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

*<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

*<sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup>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.*

*<sup>23</sup>Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings, <sup>24</sup>and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, & Luke, my fellow workers. <sup>25</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

# Leaning Into Truth

Paul greets Philemon saying “Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” because he knows what both Philemon and Onesimus need is God’s grace and peace. Paul wants grace to flow from his words and for peace to come of them. For this to happen, God Himself must get involved.

It takes Paul a while to mention Onesimus’ name. Why? What Paul means to ask of Philemon must come in the context of who the three of them are to each other in Christ. All three were men who had lived major portions of their lives outside of a relationship with Jesus. And all three were men whose lives had been transformed by Jesus. Being present for Onesimus’ and Philemon’s conversions, Paul held deep affection for them both. So he takes the time not only to outline specifically why he loves Philemon, <sup>(4-7)</sup> but also why he loves Onesimus. Though he could’ve simply said that he loved Onesimus, Paul went further, calling him “his son, even his very heart,” because he wanted Philemon to know the depth of his love. <sup>(10-12)</sup>

Martin Luther noted in this letter that Paul plays the role of Christ in the drama between Philemon and Onesimus, identifying with both the sinner and the offended party in the work of setting them at peace with each other. <sup>(2 Cor 5:16-21)</sup> This is what Christ does in the drama between God and man, and this is what we are called to do in our relationships with each other.

Paul’s plea for peace called both men into a deeper level of Christ-likeness. It wasn’t just for Onesimus that Paul’s heart was concerned here. He was also pastoring his old friend Philemon. God was moving all three of them deeper and deeper into the unfolding purpose He had for their lives—a purpose to redeem the lost while bringing glory to His Son who is our peace.

# Abolitionistic Hearts

Some might read Philemon and wonder why Paul didn’t take this opportunity to speak out against institutionalized slavery. But he did oppose slavery here, and on the most effective and foundational level he could. He appealed to Philemon, a slave owner, to regard his runaway slave as a full, equal brother in Christ; and to Onesimus to do the same with Philemon. Paul appealed to these two participants in the system of slavery to see each other’s inherent dignity as brothers in Christ. And that is deeply abolitionistic, because how could they see each other in this way and still claim one owned the life of the other. Paul undermined any hint of any right anyone would ever claim over another as their personal property, but instead set the example that their lives should be offered up for the sake of each other.

Notice, the heart of Paul’s argument here isn’t that Philemon, as a Christian, should apply some wildly “out there” idea Paul just came up with. Paul is calling his friend to embrace the core doctrines of the heart of Christianity—“there is neither slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” <sup>(Gal 3:28)</sup> If the doctrines we proclaim can’t be worked out in our day-to-day lives, what good are they? True doctrine informs our lives—at least it should—and it tells us how to love well. Our treatment of one another should come from the overflow of hearts transformed by the grace of Christ at work in us, knowing He has stepped between us, the sinful ones, and God, the offended, and has made peace.

One commentator wrote, “The reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus becomes an acted parable of the Gospel itself, which breaks into the world of sin, suspicion, and anger, and of pride and fear, with the good news that Jesus Christ has revealed God’s purposes of salvation, of human wholeness, of loving and forgiving fellowship.” <sup>(Wright 174)</sup> This whole letter is about so much more than that moment when Philemon first sees Onesimus on his doorstep. If Jesus has changed us, who are we to each other?

# Doctrine Informs Life

If Paul’s initial appeal for mercy on Onesimus’ behalf wasn’t enough, he concludes his letter by shrewdly establishing his case for it. There is no doubt Paul is hoping to persuade Philemon to respond in a certain way. And there is no doubt Paul chose his words and developed his argument as influentially as he could.

For example, in verse 13-14, Paul writes, “I would’ve been glad to keep Onesimus with me, in order that he might serve me **on your behalf** during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing **without your consent**.” In Paul’s defense of Onesimus, he presumes if Philemon had been in Rome during Paul’s imprisonment, he would have wanted to help Paul in any way he could. From that, he credits Philemon for Onesimus’ service as his substitute. <sup>(13)</sup> To imply Paul regards Onesimus’ service to him as a gift Philemon would’ve wanted to give is, well, shrewd.

**DOCTRINE INFORMS LIFE CHOICES:** Creatively and carefully, Paul is leading his friend to a conclusion he knows Philemon must arrive at on his own. Appreciate the way Paul balances his appeal to love with an airtight case for it. Paul doesn’t just appeal for Philemon to embrace the practical application of his doctrinal beliefs. He actually takes for granted that Philemon has no choice here. Doctrine informs life. Christians pray “forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors,” so Paul presumes his friend’s desire is not for strife, but for peace. For what else could it be?

**DOCTRINE TELLS THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL:** The reason our doctrine is to inform our life choices is because our doctrine tells the story of the Gospel. Paul’s expectations of Philemon are grounded in the fact that Jesus Christ has transformed their lives. In verses 18-20 Paul talks of the debt Onesimus may owe Philemon, and Paul, in his own hand, signs on as owing it now. Onesimus’ debt was now Paul’s. And Paul leaves it for Philemon to call that debt in with another shrewd question which I’d paraphrase like this: “Onesimus’ debt is now mine. I’ll repay it. But don’t forget, you owe me your life. So in light of the fact that I’ve taken his debt but you owe me your life, how much do I owe you?”

He wants Philemon to do for Onesimus what Paul did for Philemon—set him free. We find ourselves here from time to time standing between the offender and the offended. It’s messy because never does all the fault rest solely with one party. Paul’s argument in this letter is to appeal to the finished work of Christ and to let that define who we are and what we’re to do.

It is right for us to say to each other, “I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart.” <sup>(20)</sup> How do we do this? We live out our doctrine, and by so doing, we tell again the story of the love of Christ, rich and free. Doctrine tells the story of the Gospel. Living by it shows the Gospel. I pray that like the old Apostle, we’d hold what others owe us with an open hand and want the Gospel to win our arguments. May we so live to set one another free in the grace of Christ, as we’ve been set free.