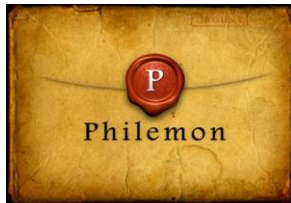


Route 66

Philemon: Unenslaved

Part 57 – May 15, 2011



In Paul's shortest surviving letter, he asks Philemon [figh-LEE-muhn] (a wealthy believer Paul had led to the Lord) to have mercy on a returning, runaway slave named Onesimus [Oh-NESS-ih-muhs], who apparently stole from Philemon and fled to Rome to blend in with the city's slave population.

Somehow Onesimus is introduced to Paul (who is under house-arrest), and Paul leads him to Jesus. Onesimus quickly becomes a trusted assistant and "adopted son" to Paul. And then one day, it's revealed that Onesimus is a runaway slave!



The ancient forum in Rome

We don't know how it happened; but, we do know that a Colossian named Epaphras [EP-uh-frass] came to Rome to get Paul's help in defending his church in Colossae against false teachers. And it turns out, Epaphras *knows* Philemon!



Colossians video

And at the end of "Philemon", Paul writes ...

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. – *Philemon 23 NIV*

And in *Colossians*, Paul introduces the man that will deliver the letter, as a fellow minister named Tychicus [TIK-ih-kuhs]; and Paul adds this ...



The site of ancient Colossae in Turkey

He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. – *Colossians 4:9a NIV*

This means Onesimus was serving Philemon in Colossae. And *now* look at how Paul opens his letter to *Philemon*:

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia [AF-ih-uh] our sister [likely his wife], to Archippus [AHR-kip-uhs] our fellow soldier [likely his son; he's encouraged in Col. 4:17] and to the church that meets in your home ... – *Philemon 1b-2 NIV*

The Colossian church most likely met in Philemon's house; and the arrival of Epaphras may have triggered Onesimus' confession. Remember how an earthquake destroyed Colossae shortly after their letter was delivered? (60-62^{AD}) The city was never rebuilt; and the ruins have *never* been excavated.

That means the remains of Philemon's house might be in there somewhere ... *look at those ruins peeking out and teasing us!*



Colossae half-buried ruins

Under Roman law, Philemon could've had Onesimus put to death! But, Onesimus makes the tough choice to trust God, turn back, and take responsibility.

So Paul sets the stage for reconciliation by making sure Philemon is aware of some crucial information.



1. Paul loves Onesimus as his own child.

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you. - *Philemon 10-12 NIV*

The slave name "Onesimus" means "useful". Paul makes a lighthearted pun here: "*Useful was useless; but is now more useful than ever!*"

2. Paul loves Philemon too much to demand submission.

... I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. - *Philemon 8b-9a NIV*

3. Philemon's choice *will* define their relationship.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. - *Philemon 17 NIV*

4. Every injustice Philemon suffered will be *fully* compensated.

If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. **[This letter just became a legal contract!]** I will pay it back - not to mention that you owe me your very self. - *Philemon 18-19 NIV*

"Oops. I didn't ... did I just ... well then, go ahead and take your salvation and eternal life into consideration - *if you want.*"

5. Philemon's actions will affect those he loves.

By greeting his wife, his son, and the church that meets at his house, Paul has ensured that his letter of request will be read to Philemon's family, friends, and fellow believers.

6. Paul will personally hold Philemon accountable.

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. - *Philemon 22 NIV*



Can you *imagine* getting a letter like this, supporting someone who has *inexcusably* betrayed and robbed and deserted you?! Actually, we did. The Bible is *exactly* like this! It's a personal letter *and* a legal contract. And regarding *reconciliation*: God is Paul, you are Philemon, and all who wrong you are your Onesimi.

Picture the person that you have the most trouble surrendering a resentful desire to “get back at” and belittle and begrudge. In the letter Jesus wrote to *you* (regarding *them*), He plainly says:

- A. I love ‘em as my own child.
- B. I love you too much to demand submission.
- C. Your choice *will* define our relationship.
- D. I will fully compensate *any* injustice you’ve suffered.
“Whatever they’ve done, charge it to Me.”
“Not to mention that you owe Me your very self! Oops. Did I just ...”
- E. Your actions will affect those you love.
- F. I will personally hold you accountable.

Paul gets unjustly criticized by modern readers for seeming to condone rather than condemn the practice of slavery.



But to be fair, you have to take three things into consideration:

1. Cultures change incrementally

Paul’s teachings are radically forward-thinking for *his* generation; like in his letter to the Colossians.

Here there is no Greek or Jew ... slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. – *Colossians 3:11 NIV*

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. – *Colossians 4:1 NIV*

And look at his personal challenge to Philemon:

Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – 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 man and as a brother in the Lord. – *Philemon 15-16 NIV*

2. Roman slavery was *not* like American slavery

I'm in no way *defending* Roman slavery or offering a comprehensive analysis; but, we need to be aware of how it differed from the abusive, sub-human treatment that American slaves suffered.

- A. 85-90 percent of Rome's population were or had been slaves.
- B. It wasn't based on race (You couldn't identify a slave by ethnicity; and they worked alongside freeborn workers).
- C. They were well educated (they were doctors, teachers, architects, artists, philosophers, and writers).
- D. It could be a career choice (educated young men would sell themselves as business administrators or estate managers).
- E. It could be a way out of poverty (supported by a wealthy owner they could learn a trade and raise a family).
- F. They could earn wages and save money (once free, they often went into business with their former owner).
- G. It was temporary and typically lasted seven years.
- H. Under Roman law slaves *had to be freed* by age 30.
- I. They could buy their freedom early. (It's not that there weren't cruel masters and mistreatment. But, unlike American slavery, it wasn't so "built into" the system.)
- J. They worshipped with owners and freeborns. (That's why Paul often addresses both slaves and masters.)

Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you — although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. — 1 Corinthians 7:20-22 NIV

So, you have to wonder why Onesimus ran if Philemon's so nice? I don't think Onesimus stole *in order* to flee; I think he fled *because* he stole, and maybe knew he was about to be found out. This brings up the third thing we must take into consideration.

3. Paul was given a greater goal

The Gospel message of freedom from bondage to sin and death, by the grace of God through the sacrifice of Christ, had the power to change hearts in a way that *unenslaved* both servant *and* owner!



City street in Pompeii

See the wide belt in the painting [above]? That's a "slave belt".

150 miles from Rome, and about 19 years after Philemon was written, Mount Vesuvius erupted and sealed the city of Pompeii in ash. Air pockets, left by long decomposed bodies, are filled with plaster, like a mold, to make casts of the dead.



This is a slave (you can tell by the belt) who died on August 24, 79^{AD}. This man served while Onesimus was probably in his 40s.

This man's belt was *very* temporary. His death on the other hand, is at 1,932 years and counting!

Having willfully sold ourselves into the slavery of sin, we've all robbed and run from our true Master in one way or another. We are all God's Onesimi! And when Jesus reconciles us to the Father, we're no longer servants, but sons and daughters. The message of the Gospel can be summed up in those four words in Philemon ...

... charge it to me. - *Philemon 18b NIV*

And when we're *unenslaved*, we become *truly* useful. No longer surviving simply to pursue pleasure and avoid pain; but, living to become all that He created us to be for His glory. And the more *this* message spread, the more Roman slavery diminished. It quickly became a distinguishing mark of Christianity. And this little letter had an enormous long-term impact!

Paul doesn't say what happened to Onesimus; but he sure made it clear that he wanted Philemon to send him back to Rome.

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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. - *Philemon 13-14 NIV*

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. - *Philemon 21 NIV*

I think Philemon sent him back and Paul trained him to teach the Gospel; and as this letter circulated, he became a minor celebrity.

When he would've been in his sixties, an early bishop named Ignatius, writes to the Ephesian church (120 miles from Colossae), and praises their bishop, who goes by the slave name, Onesimus.