

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Introduction

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Introductory Information

The Reason for Paul's Writing

- Paul wrote the letter to ask Philemon to forgive and welcome back Onesimus, who was Philemon's runaway slave and a new convert to Christ (**Phile. 10-17**).
- Paul's request surely test the sincerity of Philemon's love and faithfulness to Christ.
 - Yet, Paul was confident that Philemon would exemplify the attitude demanded of Christ (**Phile. 21**) and accept back his slave who was now on equal spiritual footing with his earthly master (**Gal. 3:28**).

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The Reason for Paul's Writing

- Throughout the letter, Paul shows great delicacy and tact in handling what could have become an explosive situation.

“While the other books of the New Testament are indeed precious treasures in the heart of every Christian, here is a little book, involving a personal and private matter between two friends and brethren in the Lord, that rises to a position of unsuspected significance, so that it sparkles like a gem of great price in the midst of other valuable treasures. This is so because of the principles of religion of our Lord exemplified in the area of human relations” (Marshall Patton, p.317).

- Not only should readers carefully examine the overall meaning of Paul's words in this letter, but we also should equally consider and learn from the lengths Paul went to as he strived to be careful with his speech while handling uniquely difficult circumstances (**Prov. 15:1**).

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Onesimus – A Runaway Slave Converted to Christ

- Onesimus was a runaway slave under the service of his master, Philemon.
- Paul and Onesimus evidently met at some point while Paul was traveling in Rome.
 - What circumstances brought the two together is unknown. Whatever the situation, at some point Paul converted Onesimus to Christ, seemingly while the former was under house arrest (**Phile. 10**).
- Paul cared deeply for Onesimus, yet he recognized it was important for his son in the faith to go back to his master.

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Onesimus – A Runaway Slave Converted to Christ

- A runaway slave voluntarily returning to his master was a radical idea.

“This runaway slave was returning under his own free will. Under ordinary circumstances, a fugitive slave who was caught and returned to his master could expect the penalty of death, or a severe beating at least. However, Onesimus had the courage to return because of his faith in the Lord and belief that the gospel would so affect the heart of Philemon that he would forgive as the Lord had done.” (Robert Harkrider, p.148).

- Onesimus being willing to voluntarily return to Philemon's service speaks volumes of this new convert's humility and desire to obey the Lord's will even though doing so would be costly (**Luke 9:23-25**).

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Philemon – A Christian Slave-Owner

- It is widely assumed that Philemon was a wealthy man since he was a slave-owner.
- As was the case with Onesimus, Philemon was likely a convert of Paul (**Phile. 19**); this conversion likely occurred somewhere other than Colossae.

“It would seem that St. Paul himself had never been to Colossae, and that his meeting with Philemon, and the conversion of the latter, must have taken place elsewhere” (The Pulpit Commentary Volume 21, p.i).

- Paul's request for Philemon to accept back Onesimus reveals much about the nature of slavery for those professing to be followers of Christ in the first century.
 - Paul requested Onesimus be received:
 - “no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother” (**Phile. 16**).
 - “as you would me” (**Phile. 17**).

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The New Testament and Slavery

- The Bible has much to say regarding the subject of slavery.
 - The Law of Moses permitted slavery (**Exod. 21; Lev. 25; etc.**).
 - Even under the Law of Christ, slavery is never condemned. The commencement of the New Covenant did, however, introduce changes in the attitudes of both servants and masters (**1 Tim. 6:1-3**).
 - **Col. 4:1** proves cruel and enforced slavery is not supported by the Law of Christ.
 - An earthly master is not permitted to act as an unjust tyrant towards his servants (**Phile. 8-17**).
 - A master must not demand anything from a servant beyond what he would be willing to do himself if the roles were reversed (**Matt. 7:12**).
 - A master must possess the same characteristics as his servants (**Eph. 6:5-8**).

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The New Testament and Slavery

- The letter to Philemon provides valuable information on the issue of slavery.
 - The fact that Onesimus was a slave and Paul did not demand or even request Philemon to release him from those bonds in no way provides affirmation for the types of cruel and forced slavery evident in the United States for centuries and still existing in some countries today.
 - This type of forced slavery violates the attitude required by slave masters in **Col. 4:1** and **Eph. 6:9**.
 - This type of slavery is condemned due to what the Lord and His apostles taught on love, kindness, and compassion that God's people must possess toward all men.
 - It is clear that if Philemon continued owning slaves, all slaves would wish to serve under him knowing the type of Godly slave-owner he would be as a follower of Christ.

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Paul's Relationship with Colossae

- Evidence suggests that Philemon was a resident of Colossae (**Phile. 2, 22; Col. 4:9**).
 - Therefore, it is likely that Philemon was a member of the Colossian church to whom Paul also wrote an epistle (**Phile. 1, 10, 23; Col. 4:7-9**).
 - Depending upon how one interprets the phrase, “*church in your house*” (**Phile. 2**), either Philemon's home was the meeting place for the Colossian church, or many people in Philemon's home were members of the Colossian church.
- As was the case with his Colossian epistle, the letter to Philemon was written while Paul was imprisoned (**Col. 1:24, 4:3, 10; Phile. 1**), and was delivered by the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus (**Col. 4:7-9**).

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Paul's Relationship with Colossae

- It is believed that both Colossians and Philemon were written during Paul's Roman imprisonment (**Acts 28**) in approximately 62 AD.

“This Epistle is closely linked with the Epistle to the Colossians. Both were carried by the same bearer, Onesimus, with whom, however, Tychicus is joined in the Epistle to the Colossians (Col 4:9). The persons sending salutations are the same, except one, Jesus called Justus (Col 4:11). In both alike Archippus is addressed (Phm 2; Col 4:17). Paul and Timothy stand in the headings of both. And in both Paul appears as a prisoner (Phm 9; Col 4:18). Hence it follows, it was written at the same time and place as the Epistle to the Colossians (which was about the same time as the Epistle to the Ephesians), namely, at Rome, during Paul's first imprisonment, A.D. 61 or 62” (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, p.437).

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Paul's Relationship with Colossae

- We do not know for certain if Paul ever set foot in Colossae.
 - Some suggest Epaphras first taught the gospel there, and internal evidence within the Colossian letter lends credence to this theory (**Col. 1:7, 2:1, 4:12-13**).
 - Epaphras was a Gentile who lived in Colossae (**Col. 4:12**), and is identified by Paul as a faithful servant of the Lord (**Col. 1:7, 4:12**), hard worker zealous for the cause of Christ (**Col. 4:13**), and a fellow prisoner (**Phile. 23**).
 - Some suggest that Paul did set foot in Colossae due to its geographical proximity to areas that we know he visited.
 - Paul traveled through Phrygia (**Acts 18:23**), and Colossae was located within Phrygia.
 - Colossae was a city in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), located about 100 miles east of Ephesus, a city where he spent the better part of three years laboring (**Acts 20:31**).
 - Whatever the case, Paul had a relationship with the church and played an integral part in its foundation (**Acts 19:10**), and he especially had a close relationship with Philemon.

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General Lessons

- Although the situation which necessitated the letter is unique, there are numerous important lessons contained in the letter that are applicable to every generation:

“Carefully read verse 2 and you will see that not only is this letter written to Philemon, but also Apphia, Archippus, and ‘the church in your house.’ This letter was read to the church. So, though this situation is a personal matter regarding Philemon and Onesimus, its message is important and practical for us today” (Brent Kercheville).

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General Lessons

- Some lessons include:
 - The gospel is for all (**Rom. 1:16; Mark 16:15-16**).
 - One's position in society is not indicative of their spiritual condition (**Luke 16:19-31**).
 - Sincere obedience to the gospel changes people (**1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 5:17**).
 - Spiritual equality in Christ (**Gal. 3:28**).
 - Tactfulness in handling potentially explosive situations (**Col. 4:6**).
 - Repentance for past wrongs is necessary even after baptism (**Rom. 6:1-4, 11-23; Eph. 4:20-24**).
 - The necessity of forgiving those who repent (**Luke 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 6:15**).
 - How to forgive those who repent, i.e. full restoration (**2 Cor. 2:3-11**).
- Remember, God preserved this letter for a reason! (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**)