

LIVING THE NEW LIFE: *PHILEMON*

The Epistle to Philemon

¹This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker,²and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.

³May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

⁴I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon,⁵because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God's people. ⁶And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ. ⁷Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people.

⁸That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do. ⁹But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.

¹⁰I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison. ¹¹Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us. ¹²I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

¹³I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf. ¹⁴But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced. ¹⁵It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. ¹⁶He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, PAUL, WRITE THIS WITH MY OWN HAND: I WILL REPAY IT. AND I WON'T MENTION THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR VERY SOUL!

²⁰Yes, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord's sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ.

²¹I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more!²²One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. ²⁴So do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my co-workers.

²⁵May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

There are just over three hundred thirty some words in the Greek version of this letter *to Philemon*. Only 268 words carry the impact of what Paul wanted to say to this beloved brother. There has been much speculation on the part of scholars about this letter. Seth Ehorn says,

Its brevity makes it the perfect candidate for the application of various methods to the letter wholesale—for example, discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis,² epistolary analysis, and sociological analysis.⁴ A steady stream of commentaries has been produced ranging, for instance, from roughly twelve pages to well over five hundred pages.⁶¹

What we want to do this week is to discover the message from our own observations about what is actually said. Ehorn continues,

... as modern interpreters we are operating at a deficit. We are reading only half of the conversation. Nevertheless, such historical distance (not to mention social, political, etc.) *should not* drive readers to despair. Rather, it should warrant caution against over interpretation and humility regarding conclusions.²

To evaluate all that has been written, we need to make some initial observations of what this letter is actually saying for ourselves. Be careful, prayerful, and detailed as you approach this twenty-five verse letter.

1. *Who wrote this letter (1:1)?*

2. *To whom was it written (1:1-2)?*

In New Testament times, people did not usually have separate church buildings to meet in. It was customary for someone with a large home to open it up as a meeting place for at least part of the church. Many places had multiple church house groups who all knew each other. The elders (pastors) of these groups would meet together to represent each church. Colossae may have had more than one house church, but it is possible that there was only one, the one which met in Philemon's house.

Slavery was a huge part of life in the 1st Century. J.O. Lincoln writes,

With the Romans, a slave passed indeed for a human being, but one without any personal rights; ... He was in the *potestas* (power) of the master; ... the master had

¹ Seth M. Ehorn, [Philemon](#), ed. H. Wayne House and W. Hall Harris, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011), Phm.

² Ehorn, [Philemon](#)

entire right of property in the slave, and could do just as he pleased with his person and his life, his powers and his earnings.

In regard to the power of life and death, it was unlimited. The master could use the slave for any purpose that suited his own pleasure. He could punish him, put him to pain and torture, and, free from all obligation to give an account of his actions, could put him to death in any way that pleased him. ... In addition to this, it may be observed, that the Grecian principle was introduced by Antoninus, that slaves who had sought refuge in a sanctuary from the excessive severity of a master, could not be brought back by force, but the master was compelled to sell them.³

Slavery, then and now, was a hateful institution, but what could be done? To have released all the slaves at once would have destroyed the lives of many people, slave and master. Tom Wright has made the analogy between the social impact today of telling people they must immediately give up their automobiles.

With this understanding, let's look with clear eyes at the people involved in this institution.

3. *What facts can you observe about Philemon?* Be sure to record a verse number(s) with each observation.

Which of these are facts and which are inferences? An inference is a conclusion or opinion that is formed because of known facts. Usually the statement is then considered to also be true.

4. *What can we know about Onesimus from this letter and Colossians 4:9?*

³ J. O. Lincoln, "[Roman Slavery](#)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2, no. 7 (1845): 571–572.

5. *What was Paul asking Philemon to do?* Consider all the statements in this letter as well as Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11.

6. *From this then, what do we learn about the new life?*

Christianity arose in a complex social setting. Many conflicting religions and philosophies contributed to a pluralistic environment where anyone could justify anything in the name of a personal god. Secularism rose to new popularity as Greeks and Romans often made only a token acknowledgment of the place of religion in society.

Christianity met these challenges. Christians claimed that faith in Christ brought a totally new way of thinking and acting. Everywhere Christianity spread, a sense of morality and social justice naturally went with it.⁴

Are there slaves today? To investigate this topic and the reality in the United States as well as around the world, visit: www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking

⁴ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 334–335.