

Philemon: A Practical Letter For Christian Living

Philemon 1:1-25

There are twenty-seven books of the New Testament divided mainly into; The Gospels (Synoptics and John), Acts, Paul's Epistles, General Epistles and Apocalypse/Revelation. Majority of the NT are epistles (Paul's and others') forming twenty-one of the twenty-seven. Paul wrote thirteen 13 letters--some to churches, pastors and individuals. Further, four of Paul's letters are called prison epistles because they were written in Prison; namely: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. Philemon is an epistle and to study it we have to approach it as a letter. In doing so, we will seek to answer five questions: Who wrote Philemon, when and where was Philemon written, Who was/were the recipients, Why was it written and what can we learn from it? Answering the first four questions will lead us into a proper application---what we can learn from Philemon.

Who Wrote Philemon?

Letters in the New Testament world were written just as we write letters today, albeit with some differences. Letters in the then world starts with a greeting and salutation where the author(s) introduce themselves. Sinclair Ferguson in his book *Let's Study Philippians* notes that "Letters began with three words: (i) the name of the writer; (ii) the name of the recipients; (iii)'greetings'."¹ We see examples of these standard openings of epistles identifying authors in some of these epistles: 2 Timothy 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2 John 1:1. Now in answering who wrote Philemon; let's look at verse 1: "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother..." Clearly, we see Paul introducing himself as the author. Timothy is also introduced to us as a co-author. Timothy, was Paul's protégé who was being raised as a Pastor

When and Where Was Philemon Written?

Paul's opening words "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus..." is no "spiritual language". He wrote from prison (vv.1; 9; 10; 22). And Philemon as has been identified earlier is one of the four prison epistles. It was believed to have been written in Rome (Acts 28:16; 31) in A.D. 62

Who Was The Recipient?

Philemon, the name of the letter, is the recipient: "To Philemon our beloved fellow worker..." (v.1). The letter was also perhaps to be read by others as they have been included in the recipients: "...and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house" (v.1). Philemon was a wealthy and generous man who was hosting a church in his house. It is to be noted that "The early Christians met in believers' homes" (1 Cor. 16:19; Col.

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth, 2005), 1

4:15)². Again, Philemon was converted under Paul's ministry. We know this because Paul mentions it in v.17 pointing out to Philemon that he owes him his very life: "A reference to the fact that Philemon was converted through Paul's ministry, so that Philemon "owed" Paul something far greater, namely, his eternal life."³

Why Was The Letter Written?

Philemon had a slave--Onesimus-- who run away with stolen money from his master. However, in the course of his "runaway life" Onesimus encountered Paul's ministry and was converted. He served Paul in his imprisonment for some time. However, Paul knowing the right thing to be done sent Onesimus back to his master. And the letter to Philemon accompanied Onesimus' return. Paul wrote appealing to Philemon to receive Onesimus back. Now, there is a clarification which needs to be done concerning slavery as it occurred in New Testament. This is necessary because one may ask why Paul, an apostle will want a slave to return to his master when he has had the opportunity to escape. Also, the repulsive imagery of slavery in a modern world may be imposed on the New Testament hence losing entirely the lessons contained in this letter. To this, I quote the below for clarification.

People became slaves in various ways: Many were prisoners taken in war; others were kidnapped by slave hunters; still others were enslaved through debt; and, of course, there were the children born to slaves. The slavery many English-speaking readers of the Bible are most familiar with is that of the blacks in America, but the Roman situation was more complicated. Within the general category the most burdensome form of slave life was endured by those who did heavy manual labor, e.g., in the mines, building construction, and the rowing banks on ships. By contrast many who worked in households for understanding masters would not have been much worse off than servants in wealthy British homes at the end of the last century known to TV watchers through "Upstairs, Downstairs." On a particularly high level were the very well-educated slaves who administered their master's estates or businesses, instructed the children, and even earned their own money. These would have been the group from which many emerged by gaining or being given freedom.⁴

How Do We Apply The Letter To Our Lives? (What Can We Learn From it?)

Having explored the first four questions, we can now go further to find out how the letter is relevant or can be applied to our live. Below we will identify some lessons in the text relevant to our Christian living.

² Sproul, R. C. (Ed.), *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2189.

³ Notes on Philemon 1:18-19 in *ESV Global Study Bible*, 2012

⁴ Raymond E Brown, S.S, *An Introduction To The New Testament* (New York, Doubleday, 1997), 503-504

Christian Interpersonal Relationships

Christians relate in diverse ways with one another (Ephesians 5:1-33; 6:1-9, Mark 12:33) and the heart of the letter is about Christian relationships and reconciliation when things go wrong. One of the first lessons we learn in our relationship with each other is *the place of intercessory prayers for each other* (James 5:16). Paul tells Philemon "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers" (v.4). This teaches us about gratitude to God for our fellow believers and we must make it a point to remember all believers---those we know and believers in general---in our prayers. People often ask us to remember them in our prayers and yet many are guilty of not honouring this request. It shouldn't be so. Let's get involved in each other's life through intercession. We must also pray for the needs of those who minister the gospel. We see this in Paul's closing words in Philemon: "...for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you (v.22). Paul here asks for prayers for his release.

Philemon also teaches *generosity* towards one another marked by love and faith in Christ. Christian relationship must be characterised by love that shares---*Koinonia* (vv.5-7; 1Corinthians 13, Philippians 1:5). Philemon, as a person is presented to us as a generous person: "For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you" (v.7). He was a generous man concerned with the upkeep of the saints. Not only that, he had opened his home for Christian fellowship. His faith in Christ overflowed into generosity towards the saints and in service to the Lord.

Christian relationship is also *not manipulative*. Paul, though he was an apostle, he found it necessary not to impose his will on Philemon with regards to the return of Onesimus. Paul tells Philemon "...though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you..." (vv.8-9). The subsequent verses were all appeals from Paul for Philemon to receive Onesimus---not "by compulsion but of your own accord (v.14). A window is opened here for us to see into Paul's heart. He practices what he preaches. Remember in 1 Corinthians 13:5, Paul has written that love is not selfish---it doesn't insist on its own. Here is Paul living what he preaches. He could use his apostolic office to get what he wants; but rather, for love's sake he appeals to Philemon. In our Christian relationships; especially in places of leadership, we must ensure we are not abusing our authority over those God has given us responsibility over.

Finally, Christian relationships must be marked by *forgiveness* and not be *vindictive* (vv.17-19). In the New Testament Hellenistic world, a captured slave who attempted running receives a harsh punishment. According to John MacArthur, recounting the lives of slaves in the then world, points out that "Their master's had virtually unlimited power to punish them, and sometimes did so severely for the slightest infractions."⁵ Paul however calls for something radical than what the culture promotes. He calls for reconciliation, especially so because Onesimus is now not just a slave, but a fellow believer. Christian relationships must be that of forgiveness. We have been forgiven and reconciled to God and we must in that same spirit seek

⁵ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1827-1828

to forgive one another. In the prayer our Lord taught the disciples, he taught them and by extension us to pray "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12; cf 18:21-22).

Christ Saves

When Onesimus escaped from his master, he was an unbeliever. But now he is returning to his master not as a returnee slave so to speak; but as a brother in the Lord: "no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother--especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v.16). This is the beautiful message of the Christian gospel! It reconciles. It bonds together in love people from all status of life: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). What happened to Onesimus? He encountered Christ and was changed. Sinners need to come to faith in Christ to be forgiven, cleansed of their sins and above all be reconciled to God for eternal life. What Onesimus had in common with his master was that they have all come to faith in Christ through the gospel. We see Onesimus' life transformed by Christ to the point that Paul wrote "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me" (v.11).

The Providence of God

Though not directly, Paul teaches the providence of God in this letter. Paul links Onesimus' salvation to his running away. He run away to be saved so to speak: "for this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever" (v.15). Perhaps, if he had not run away, he wouldn't have been saved, Paul seem to be saying. I see Paul trying to bring Philemon's attention to the fact that whatever happened was for a reason, that is, Onesimus' salvation. What Paul asserts here can be compared to the narrative of Joseph and his brothers. What happened, according to Joseph was meant for good by God for the sake of posterity (Genesis 50:19-21). We also read in Romans 8:28 that "for those who love God all things work together for good."

As believers, we must come to the point of looking at our world through the lenses of God's providential ordering of events to the accomplishment of his will: "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."⁶ The believer doesn't live by chance but by the divine ordering of our God and King.

Christians And Suffering

There is a world of erroneous teaching out there that Christians must not suffer. But the Bible doesn't teach such. Paul says in Philippians 1:29 that "For it has been granted to you that for the

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, 5.1

sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." This is the testimony of Scripture. If we are followers of Christ, we are going to face all categories of suffering however Christ promises us his peace (John 16:33).

In this letter, we see a clear picture of Christian suffering. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Philemon, a faithful brother in the Lord had may have also encountered an emotional suffering pertaining to his runaway slave. As Christians, we must not, in any way expect our lives to be rosy without any setbacks or suffering for that is not promised in the Bible. This doesn't however mean the Christian faith is all gloomy for we have also been promised joy and peace in the Lord (John 14:27). However, this promise of peace is at the backdrop of suffering. We will suffer, but Christ is with us and we can have peace in whatever situation we find ourselves.

Keep Hope Alive

Despite the challenges and problems we will encounter in our Christian walk, we must not lose heart. We must continue to hope and believe in God in all of life's circumstances. And Paul clearly points to the hope he has of been released from prison. He wrote: "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" (v.22). Though he was in prison, Paul didn't become despondent. He kept hope alive.

In fact if you read through his prison epistles, they exude with joy. In Philippians 3:1 he says "rejoice in the Lord". In Ephesians he breaks forth with praise: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Ephesians 1:3). Finally in Colossians 1:24 he says "Now I rejoice in my sufferings...." With Paul's hope of release from prison, we can learn something about our own situations. We must keep hope alive in Christ. As believer's, what we have is a living hope and we must never cast it away in whatever situation

Philemon: A Practical Letter For Christian Living is a [Sovereign Grace Fellowship](#) teaching series.

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