

Philemon in One Lesson

(Overview of the Letter of Philemon)

I. Background for This Lesson

- a. In the course of studying the Law of Moses, and especially in **Leviticus**, we have referred many times to passages in **Colossians 2** to explain how:
 - i. On the one hand, the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross and canceled with the death of Jesus.
 - ii. On the other hand, the Law of Moses foreshadowed many things that have now been fully realized, through Jesus.
 - iii. Therefore, while we are no longer bound to follow the Law of Moses, it is still worthwhile for Christians to study it. This can give us insights regarding things that have now been fulfilled, which in the Law were in the form of shadows.
 - 1. Through this, we can get a deeper understanding of what God is calling us to today.
- b. **Colossians** and **Philemon** are two of four letters of Paul that are often referred to as his “prison epistles”.
 - i. In all four, somewhere in each letter, Paul says he is in chains or in prison.
 - ii. The four letters are **Colossians**, **Philemon**, **Ephesians**, and **Philippians**.
 - iii. The most common, ‘traditional’ explanation is that Paul wrote all four letters around the same time, during his first (roughly 2-year) imprisonment in Rome. That occurs at the end of **Acts 28**. If that is the case, Paul may have written these letters around 60-62 AD.
 - 1. However, it is hard to be 100% sure about that. Paul also was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years before he went to Rome and apparently was in prison other times during his ministry.
 - 2. “Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, *in prisons more frequently*, in deaths often.” (**2 Corinthians 11:23**, NKJV)

3. "If, in the manner of men, I have *fought with beasts at Ephesus*, what advantage is it to me? ..." (**1 Corinthians 15:32**, NKJV)

c. About Colosse

- i. Colosse was an ancient city in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey. We sometimes call this region 'Asia Minor' today.
- ii. Ephesus, a port city on the coast, was the most influential city in that province. Paul had spent time in Ephesus, teaching daily in the school of Tyrannus for two years, "so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus" (**Acts 19:8-10**).
- iii. The city of Colosse was inland in a river valley and on a major east-west highway route, about 10-15 miles (15-25 km) from Laodicea.
 1. There are several mentions of Laodicea in Colossians. It appears that there were connections between these two churches; they were encouraged to exchange their respective letters from Paul.
 2. Laodicea was one of the 'seven churches of Asia' in **Revelation 2-3**. This was to become a church referred to as wealthy and "lukewarm".

d. About the church in Colosse

- i. Paul's letter to **Philemon** was addressed to a member of the church in Colosse.
 1. Due to the obvious overlap between these two letters, I think it is a great idea to study **Philemon** and **Colossians** together.
- ii. Paul mentions that the church had been taught by Epaphras, who apparently had become a fellow prisoner with Paul (**Colossians 1:7, 4:12, Philemon 23**).
- iii. Apparently, Paul knew a lot about the church in Colosse from Epaphras and others. There is no indication that at the time of writing these letters, that Paul had ever visited that church.
- iv. The church at that time was meeting in homes.
- v. The church included free men and women, as well as both slaveholders and slaves (similar to other cultures throughout the ancient world).

- vi. It appears that most of the church members were from Gentile backgrounds, based on Paul's statement:
 - 1. "... the mystery [*of the gospel which Paul preached*] which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them, God willed to make known what are *the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you*, the hope of glory."
(**Colossians 1:26-27**, NKJV)
- vii. Paul says he is sending the letter to the Colossians along with Tychicus and Onesimus. He identifies Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved brother, who is now one of you."

II. Paul's Letter to Philemon

- a. Paul addresses this letter to Philemon, a leader of the church in Colosse, to his fellow laborers, and to the church that meets in his house.
- b. Paul apparently is sending this letter along with Onesimus; it seems that this letter may have been sent at or about the same time as the letter to the **Colossians** was sent.
- c. Onesimus had been the slave of Philemon. He ran away before he was a Christian. Paul had been personally involved in leading Philemon to faith in Jesus Christ.
 - i. Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son whom I have begotten while in my chains" (**Philemon 10**)
 - ii. **Question:** When Paul was preaching the gospel to Philemon, a runaway slave, what do you think "counting the cost" was like?
 - 1. Do you think Paul preached some form of the prosperity gospel to Onesimus, that "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free", or "there is neither slave nor free in Christ"?
 - 2. Did Paul preach, "Become a Christian, and you can have a great life just like I have"? (Imagine hearing the clanking of Paul's chains in the background.)
 - 3. Consider what Paul actually preached, in context:
 - a. "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God."
(**Colossians 3:22**, NKJV)

- b. “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.” (**1 Corinthians 15:19**, NKJV)
 - iii. Part of the cost of Philemon becoming a Christian was that he would need to return to his master and turn himself in. He would have to give up his freedom and face the consequences.
 - 1. This example is one of many that could be used to demolish the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’ (found in many forms), which is actually a *false gospel*.
- d. **Question:** If you were Onesimus, who was now planning to return to his master, what would you be thinking?
 - i. I would be thinking something along the lines of:
 - 1. “Do I REALLY need to do this? Is there any other way?”
 - 2. “Philemon is going to want to kill me, or at least beat me to a pulp, or make my life going forward VERY difficult, much worse than it was before I ran away.”
 - ii. Keep in mind what Peter wrote regarding slaves in the ancient world:
 - 1. Read **1 Peter 2:18-24**.
 - 2. Slaves were beaten for their faults. Peter said they should endure it even if they did nothing wrong. They should consider the example of Christ’s suffering.
- e. **Question:** If you were Paul, sending your beloved new spiritual son back to his master (who was likely very angry), what would you be thinking and doing?
 - i. I would be appealing to his master, Philemon, to be kind and understanding to Onesimus. I would use whatever leverage I had to press my case.
 - ii. That is exactly what Paul does in this letter.
 - 1. Paul addresses the letter to Philemon and to his close friends, including the members of his house church.
 - 2. Paul starts by praising Philemon for his great love for the other Christians; and says *how much joy* that gives him (Paul).
 - 3. Paul does not command Philemon, but instead appeals to him to respond voluntarily, on the basis of:

- a. For love's sake; and
 - b. The fact that Paul is an old man who is in chains for the sake of Christ.
4. Paul refers to Onesimus as his spiritual son, "my own heart."
5. Paul says he is willing to personally reimburse Philemon for any financial loss incurred by Onesimus abandoning his role.
6. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus "as you would receive me."
7. Then Paul plays the 'trump card'.
 - a. "I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—*not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.*" (**Philemon 19**, NKJV)
 - i. I don't know what Paul was referring to, but Philemon did.
 - ii. Paul said that Philemon owed Paul his very life (Regardless of whether Paul meant this physically or spiritually, this is a big deal!)
 - iii. Perhaps Paul risked his life for Philemon at some point, or was instrumental in bringing Philemon to faith in Christ.
8. Paul closes his case:
 - a. "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that *you will do even more than I say.*" (**Philemon 21**, NKJV)
 - b. Then he asks Philemon to prepare a guest room, for Paul to visit and stay with him.
 - i. Paul will want to visit his 'beloved son' Onesimus and see how he is doing (and how he is being treated).
 - ii. Keep in mind also that this letter is being shared with the entire house church.
- f. **Question:** If you were Philemon and received a letter like that, from the hand of your runaway servant, how would you respond?

III. What Happened to Onesimus?

- a. Ignatius (c. 35-107 AD), bishop of the church in Antioch who was martyred in Rome c. 107 AD, was a personal disciple of one or more of the apostles (Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, ed. David Bercot, p. xvii). He wrote about Onesimus in three of his letters.
 - i. “Seeing, then, that we have become acquainted with your multitude [perhaps referring to an abundant gift?] in the name of God, by Onesimus, who is your bishop, in love which is unutterable, whom I pray that you love in Jesus Christ our Lord, and that all of you imitate his example, for blessed is He who has given you such a bishop, even as you deserve [to have].”
 1. (Source: Ignatius of Antioch, *Second Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians*, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 101)
 2. Points made by Ignatius here include:
 - a. Ignatius knew Onesimus. (Ignatius also mentions him in two other letters, found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 112 and 114).
 - b. Onesimus had become a bishop (overseer) of the church in Ephesus.
 - c. Ignatius had great respect for Onesimus as a godly man whose life was worthy of imitation.
 - d. Ignatius encouraged the people of Ephesus to be grateful to God for giving them such a good shepherd in Onesimus.
- b. The tradition handed down in the Eastern Orthodox churches regarding Onesimus includes:
 - i. Philemon released him back to the apostle Paul.
 - ii. He ended up being a missionary to spread the gospel in Colosse, Spain and other places.
 - iii. He was made bishop in Gaza. In his old age he was bishop of Ephesus.
 - iv. During the reign of the emperor Trajan (89-117 AD), Onesimus was arrested and brought to trial before the eparch Tertillus. Onesimus maintained his faith in Christ; and thereafter was stoned, then beheaded with a sword.

- v. (Source: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2021/02/15/100526-apostle-onesimus-of-the-seventy>)

IV. Lessons for Us from Philemon, Onesimus and Paul

- a. Paul did not soft-pedal the implications of accepting the gospel, even to young converts. He told Onesimus that as a follower of Christ, he had to go back to his master.
 - i. The way of the gospel is a *narrow and difficult road*. We must not add anything to it, but neither can we avoid the hard teachings when bringing others to Christ.
 - 1. Repentance from sin is part of the gospel message.
 - 2. We need to address drugs, alcohol, immorality, pornography, tax avoidance, lying, cheating, greed, not taking care of parents and others, etc.
 - ii. Paul himself had to count the cost, going from the hunter of Christians to becoming one of those hunted.
 - iii. Onesimus rose to the challenge, and followed the example of Paul.
 - iv. Never resort to giving a *false gospel pitch*: encouraging someone to become a Christian in order to *improve their life in this life* (via improved family, marriage, friends, better finances, etc.).
- b. The gospel is not about Marxist-type “let’s find the oppressor” class analysis.
 - i. Paul did not treat Onesimus as a member of an oppressed class nor Philemon as a member of an oppressor class.
 - ii. They each had to respond to the teachings of Christ in the situation they were in.
- c. Paul had the heart of a shepherd who was looking out for his young convert. He did everything in his power to take care of Philemon, including exerting his influence in a good way.
 - i. He was “wise as a serpent” yet also “innocent as a dove” in the way he tried to protect Onesimus.
- d. Paul could have ordered Philemon; but instead, appealed to him on the basis of *love and gratitude*.
 - i. Lesson to us: don’t be quick to be heavy-handed and use positions of authority to order others around.

- e. You never know the impact that one life of faith can have. Consider Onesimus, a former runaway slave!