

## Philemon, A Study In Grace

### Overview

This is another of the Prison Epistles, the others being Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians. Written about 60-61 AD.

Main Characters:

Philemon- a wealthy man living in Colossae. The congregation met in his home. (vs 2) He was a Gentile, owning slaves. (Interestingly, his name means affectionate, or one who is kind.)

Onesimus- A run away slave owned by Philemon. His departure was expensive to Philemon. (vs 15 & 18)

Paul- An apostle to the Gentiles, (Rom 11:13) Imprisoned in Rome when this letter was written. (vs 9).

In our flesh we are slaves to sin, wandering, because we are lost. We lack direction or purpose. Onesimus did not seek Paul out as he ran from his master, Philemon. Onesimus purpose as he journeyed to Rome was likely to get lost in the masses, where he would be difficult to find. When Onesimus escaped, fearfully looking over his shoulder, he did not know that God was divinely arranging freedom greater than his wildest imagination. (Eph. 3:20 & 21)

Are we not grateful that even in the masses of people of the entire earth, God has found us? (Eph 1:4-10) As we wander in a futile attempt to find freedom on our own God is providentially arranging circumstances to invite us to Himself. We may not intentionally seek God, at least at first, in our rebellious, sinful life. God brings to Himself those who do not know they are seeking Him. (Isa 65:1, Luke 5:32)

Paul grows to love Onesimus. He considers him his beloved child. (vs 10) In this letter Paul seeks to restore Onesimus to Philemon, not as a slave, but as a brother, in freedom. (vs 16) Paul offers to pay any debt owed by Onesimus to his master. (vs 18) Paul, so appreciative of the grace he has received, the debt he owed and paid by another, extends this grace toward Onesimus.

Christ has provided the same grace Paul received to each of us. He has paid the debt we owe. He has offered us pardon from our death sentence. He has called us as co-heirs, brothers and sisters giving us full freedom sonship brings.

Onesimus becomes useful to Paul. (vs 13) His name means “useful.” We too are called to usefulness in the kingdom of God. (Romans 12:11 NLT - Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.)

*Key Verse: I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ- Philemon 1:6*

**Day 1:**

Philemon 1:17 & 18 “So if you consider me a partner, accept him as you would me. and if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”

**Prayer Focus:** LORD, help me to truly comprehend I am hopelessly bound for hell without You. I have no right standing within myself. I can not earn my place in heaven. Help me, LORD, to reflect the grace You have shown me toward others, never thinking of myself as better than anyone else. Help me to recognize the equal standing we all have in view of Your holiness. Give me a burden to share the hope of freedom You have given to me. I did not deserve it, I did not earn it. Help me to fully appreciate and share this precious gift of grace.

1. How does Paul, a man of considerable authority in the early church, show grace to Onesimus, a friend's fugitive slave, breaking the law? (vs 8 & 9)

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2. Does Paul view himself as better than either Philemon or Othesimus? How does he refer to himself? (vs 17-19)

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3. How does he refer to Philemon? (vs 1, 7, 20)

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4. How does he refer to Onesimus? (vs. 16)

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5. What mindset should we have toward ourselves and others in the body if we follow Paul's example? (1 Cor. 3:9, 23, 2 Cor. 6:1 & 2)

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6. How do you suppose Paul's reference to both slave and owner as his brothers influence Philemon's response to the return of his run away slave? (vs 16 and 1 Pet 4:8)

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7. Explain how Paul is reflecting the grace he received from Christ in his intercession for Onesimus, a willfully rebellious and disobedient slave? How did he remind Philemon that he, too, received grace?

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**Life Application:**

Living in real grace enables us to "pay grace forward." In a society that has become so self focused what are practical ways you stay grace focused thereby avoiding an entitlement attitude with Christ and others?

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**Day 2**

*Key Verse: I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ- Philemon 1:6*

On the Lam

Philemon 1:15a For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time...

**Prayer Focus:**

LORD, I am very aware of my ability to avoid things that make me uncomfortable. I know I hide from truth that may be painful for me, and that my heart deceives me. I run from things I do not want to do. But, I also know that You call me to reliance on you. Please, LORD, speak to me when I am “running.” Help me to recognize this as an opportunity to grow more dependant and closer to You.

God is no stranger to our tendency as humans to run. We run from our problems, from responsibilities, from fear, even from blessings! The first human pair hid in the garden, thinking they could hide their guilt. Hagar was another run away slave, running from Sarai. Jacob ran from Esau. Jonah ran from his assignment. It is prophesied the kings of the earth will attempt to hide from God in judgement. From Genesis to Revelation God reveals He knows how we are prone to run. But we can not run from the sight of God! (Gen 16:13, Ps 139:7-12, Rev 6:15-17)

8. Review the list of examples of runners found in scripture. What are some of the reasons they ran?

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9. Is there any indication that Paul encouraged Onesimus to continue in a fugitive state?

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10. Aside from the danger of “getting caught,” what harm would or could result if Onesimus chose to remain a fugitive instead of risking reconciliation with his master,

a.) in the church body? \_\_\_\_\_

b.) in Onesimus relationship with Christ? \_\_\_\_\_

c.) in Onesimus usefulness to Paul, Philemon and other believers? \_\_\_\_\_

d.) the reputation of the church? \_\_\_\_\_

Please consider scriptural reasons for your response, even if you don’t know the exact scripture. Does running bring any different dangers in today’s church? \_\_\_\_\_

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11. Isa 55:8 & 9 says For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways. This is the LORD’S declaration. For as heaven is higher than earth so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

How does this effect our propensity to run in any of its forms? \_\_\_\_\_

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Guilt often causes us to run FROM God. Grace causes us to run TO God

Life Application:

How do the following scriptures reassure us of the grace that causes us to run TO our Savior in trials and hardship? \_\_\_\_\_

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Rom 8:1 & 2 Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus because the Spirit’s law of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Eph 3:16-19 I pray that He may grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power in the inner man, through His Spirit and that the Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith, I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of Gods love and to know the Messiah's love that surpasses knowledge, so you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

### Day 3

Key Verse: *I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ- Philemon 1:6*

Times of Refreshment

Philemon 1:12- I am sending him back to you as a part of myself.

Prayer Focus:

LORD, Please bring to mind any need of confession that would block You from reigning fully in my life. Help me realize TRUE repentance, the kind that honors you. The kind of repentance that comes from recognizing Your holiness. The kind of repentance that brings refreshment and healing. I do not want to live as the world around me, in regret of getting caught. Help me instead to regret any way I have grieved you and failed to live up to the amazing honor of being a daughter of the king. I love you, and want to please you always. Thank you for grace that gives me the freedom to come to you in confession and repentance.

Onesimus may have run out of hopelessness. He may have run out of rebelliousness. We do not know for a certainty. Let us consider the dilemma faced by Onesimus once he accepted Christ as his Savior. What is a newly converted Christian to do? Onesimus knew Paul would like to have him stay, Paul said as much in his letter to Philemon (vs 13). Just as Paul did not want to command Philemon to do the right thing because of his authority, but because of love (vs 8 & 9) so too he must have reasoned and nurtured Onesimus with scripture and godly precepts to the right heart response to the choices to be made.

Onesimus could have reasoned he ran away before he knew Christ, and was therefore free to live from his conversion forward as a free man. Paul knew the dangers of such reasoning and submitted the decision of Onesimus physical freedom to the rightful authority, Philemon. (vs. 14) Onesimus must have been in agreement, he made the journey from Rome to Colossae willfully, and did not run away from his obligation before Christ.

Repentance. Often it is a painful, conflicted journey to the healing offered through genuine grief of wrongdoing. Onesimus needed to arrive at true, godly repentance for the power of the Holy Spirit to work in himself and his master. He could not do this out of affection for Paul. He could not do this with ulterior motives, hoping his God fearing master would respond to Paul's intercession by granting a full pardon and freedom. Onesimus had to return to his master in godly repentance, willing to accept the rightful decision of his master. This would take an amazing amount of faith on the part of this fledgling Christian.

2 Cor 7:10 says- For godly grief produces a repentance not to be regretted and leading to salvation, but worldly grief produces death.

12. Explain the difference between worldly and godly grief and repentance.

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13. How would Onesimus concern for God’s name strengthen him to return knowing the possibility of physical punishment, even death? \_\_\_\_\_

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14. Col 3:22 says-Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, in order to please men, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Paul also wrote Colossians, about the same time as Philemon. Onesimus was being taught by Paul during this time. Considering these facts how do you think this scripture affected Onesimus thought process about whether or not to return to Philemon? \_\_\_\_\_

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15. In verse 11 Paul said to Philemon “Once he (Onesimus) was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.”  
Jer 15:19a says Therefore this is what the LORD says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me...”  
How did the repentance of Onesimus increase his usefulness to both Paul and Philemon?

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**Life Application:**

Read Gal 6:2-3 & 9-10, and use it to answer the following:

How can we help a brother or a sister walking through the journey of repentance and restoration, with what result in mind? (Eph. 4:16) \_\_\_\_\_

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**Day 4**

*Key Verse: I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ- Philemon 1:6*

Forgiveness

Philemon 1:14: But I didn’t want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will.

**Prayer Focus:** Heavenly Father, I know your commandment to forgive. I know you have told us to forgive repeatedly. (Eph 4:32, Matt 18:22) I also know that I am prone to hold onto hurts, like precious baubles, to pull out of the vault of my unforgiving heart and study, from every angle, to get the full benefit of holding my grudge. Help me LORD to clean out these poisonous places in my heart. Help me to be honest with myself and honest with You. I want to bring You glory with my life. Help me to love with the love You first gave me, so that I may be in unity with my brothers as you commanded. (1 Cor. 1:10) Help me give my hurts to You and love unconditionally.

Paul could have used his authority as an apostle to tell Philemon what to do with his slave. He could have placed a heavy demand on Philemon, instead of allowing Philemon the opportunity to show his

love for Christ, love for the Church, love for his brother and love for Paul. Paul, in grace, gave Philemon the opportunity to bring glory to God. Paul likely had brought Philemon to Christ (vs19) In his opening sentences of this personal letter, Paul shares his confidence in Philemon, from the good reports he has heard of his spiritual son in Colossae. (vs. 5-7). These reports probably had no little share influence on Paul's confidence that Philemon would do the right thing regarding Onesimus.

We need to take into consideration the setting in which Philemon was making his decision. He was a man of influence in a major Roman city. His fellow wealthy slave owners may have pressured him to "throw the book" at Onesimus, because they did not want their own slaves to get any ideas of running away and then expecting to be given emancipation. He had other slaves to consider. How would forgiving Onesimus impact his authority with them? The church met in his home, If he punished Onesimus, how would they react to that decision. Paul telling Philemon what to do would have relieved Philemon of much difficulty. But....it would not be in the best interest of anyone involved, it would have just be easier.

Lets consider three possible choices Philemon may have tossed around.

1. Punish Onesimus severely, perhaps choosing the death penalty, to keep other slaves in line.
2. Allow Paul to pay restitution for the wrong committed by Onesimus, thereby saving face with fellow businessmen and slave owners and perhaps with his own slaves.
3. Forgive Onesimus, accept him as a brother, granting him full pardon and freedom.

We are not told, for sure, what the outcome is. Because of Philemon's love for the saints, we can be fairly confident he was thrilled to have a new brother in the faith, and accepted him as an equal, as did Paul.

16. That Paul encouraged Onesimus to go to Philemon in person, and that he did not just write a letter making an appeal for clemency presented Philemon with what opportunities? 6 & 7

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17. Did this give Philemon greater freedom to make a choice in love?

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18. How did Onesimus presenting himself to Philemon impact the process of genuine forgiveness? (Consider James 5:16)

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19. Re read Philemon verses 3-7. how would Paul's reminder to Philemon of the grace he had received, and the reminder of his reputation help him consider the request Paul was making with more favor?

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20. How important is it, when we discuss difficult matters with others to first consider the blessings they give to us, the body and Christ?

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21. Philemon's position in the church indicated some maturity, how would consideration of 1 Cor 6:7 affect his decision regarding Onesimus? \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Life Application:**

When we publicly sin or are wronged our humiliation may be greater. Philemon and Onesimus were out there for everyone to observe. Onesimus, now a believer, may have felt shame over the wrong he had committed. Philemon's honor and reputation was at stake, he may feel pressure to "save face." When in either position, how can we move forward, past being wronged or having committed a wrong, and protect the unity of the body and the reputation of the church in our community?  
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**Day 5**

*Key Verse: I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ- Philemon 1:6*

**Grace in Age and Chains**

Philemon 1:9 I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I fathered him while I was in chains.

**Prayer Focus:**

LORD, open my eyes to opportunities to share your love with others, (2 Tim 4:2a) no matter my personal circumstances. Cause me, Lord, to refresh my brothers and sisters in Christ as we journey together.(1 Thess 5:11) I want to be obedient to You, so that I invigorate my brothers and sisters in their walk. (Heb 13:7)

22. What was Paul's personal circumstance when he brought Onesimus to Christ? (vs 10)  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
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23. According to Acts 16:25-33, Paul and Silas brought the saving gospel to an entire family when detained in prison. Was Paul's sharing the gospel with Onesimus a fluke for Paul, or was this a way of life for Paul? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_

24. Read 2 Cor 8-10, 13-18,

We can expect the same kind of opposition to the gospel that Paul faced. What do the verses 13-18 both admonish and promise us? \_\_\_\_\_  
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25. Titus 2:3 & 4 calls the older women to what role in the church. Can we use being women or older as an excuse to not share Christ or encourage others in our fellowship?

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26. Please review Psalms 92:12-14. When does this scripture say we retire from being spiritually productive? \_\_\_\_\_

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27. Consider examples from scripture of people who served the LORD into their 80, 90s and beyond.

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28. Can you name, and share how someone has had a positive impact on your life even though they are advanced in years, or of limited circumstance either physically, financially, educationally? Perhaps a very young person has had a positive impact on your walk with Christ?

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Life Application:

What common hardships may cause us to feel inclined to neglect sharing the gospel of grace to others around us? How can we have victory over our flesh and share in the joy Paul knew from sharing the gospel with everyone that came into his sphere of influence? \_\_\_\_\_

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The book of Philemon teaches us much about grace. Grace leads us to repent, to forgive, to share Christ, to consider everyone our equal. Where would we be without grace? How much do we benefit from receiving and from EXTENDING grace? Grace changed Onesimus, Philemon and certainly Paul. Lives touched by grace are lives that are forever changed. Let me close with this as a prayer for you.

2 Cor 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.