

The Letter to Philemon

Characters from the Epistle:

Philemon:

- The letter was written to him.
- Born in Colossae (or maybe just brought up there)
- St. Paul the Apostle traveled to Colossae, where Philemon was converted to the Christian faith through his teachings.
- He may have met St. Paul in Ephesus.
- He was ordained Bishop of Colossae.

Apphia:

- She is a Christian woman in Colossae.
- She may have been Philemon's wife.

Archippus:

- A Greek name that means "master of the horse".
- Archippus was a worker with Philemon and Apphia. He may have been their son.
- His name is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians. "And say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.'" (Col 4:17)
- It is evident that Archippus had a strong connection with the church of Colossae.

Onesimus:

- He was Philemon's slave.
- He stole from him and ran away to Rome where he met St Paul the Apostle.
- He believed in the Christian faith, repented and was baptized.

Where & when was the letter written?

- The Epistle may have been written in Rome in the year 62-63 AD while St. Paul was in prison for the first time.
- St. Paul mentions that he is a prisoner in the book of Acts.
- He talks about his hope to be released from prison, asking Philemon to prepare a accommodation for him.
- He has Onesimus deliver the letter to Colossae.

Why was the letter written?

- The epistle that St. Paul wrote to his friend Philemon is personal and for the sake of his fugitive slave, Onesimus, after he repented and confessed.
- He sent the letter with Onesimus asking Philemon to forgive him.

What is the letter about?

- Philemon was a rich man living in Colossae and Onesimus was his slave.
- Onesimus stole from his master Philemon and ran away.
- Later he was captured and arrested in Rome and put in jail, where he met St. Paul.
- Onesimus was one of many of those imprisoned in Rome, who believed because of St. Paul's teachings.
- St. Paul had seen the remorse of Onesimus, who confessed and repented for what he had done.
- St. Paul then advised Onesimus to return to his master so that his repentance may be complete.
- It was a difficult situation because there was a chance that Onesimus would lose his life! A master had the right to kill the escaped slave or severely punish him. The other slaves had to be taught that they should not follow in his footsteps.
- St. Paul, however, wanted the repentance of Onesimus to be completed by apologizing to his master and trying to pay back for what he stole.
- The whole epistle is a letter from the St. Paul the apostle to Philemon who accepted the faith through his teachings, encouraging him to accept Onesimus not as a slave but as a brother.
- That is why the introduction of the letter is filled with wisdom and overflowing with love from St. Paul to Philemon, before he asks him to forgive Onesimus.
- St. Paul is accustomed to behaving in a Christian way. That is why we find him bestowing a lot of love on Philemon before he asks him to he do something for him.

- He begins his request boldly, “In Christ;” not only did he request but he also commanded, for his request was reasonable.
- Love persuades Philemon to accept Onesimus: “Since we were still sinners, Christ died for us”, especially because it is St. Paul, who is the father, the elder and the prisoner, who is making the request.

Note 1:

The subject is sensitive and personal because Philemon as a master is entitled to discipline his slave so that no other slave would emulate his behavior.

Note 2:

The epistle here is dealing with a serious issue in society, which is slavery.

What did it mean to be a slave in those times?

- A slave was considered part of the estate and was owned just like a piece of furniture.
- The master had the right to beat up his slave or even kill him without being questioned.
- When a slave died, no funeral was held and no one mourned for him or her.
- The punishment of theft could be as severe as death.
- To their master’s, the slaves did not have any rights or dignity. They could be humiliated for the smallest reason or even without reason.
- The Roman law also deprived the slaves of all human rights. They were not included in any census even though they formed one third of the population.

The new status of Onesimus:

- He has become a son to St. Paul. As St. John Chrysostom puts it, “This was not to embarrass Philemon, or quench his anger. It was to bring him joy.”

New Characteristics of Onesimus:

- He announces that he was good for nothing in the past but adds that he is now valuable.
- This is an interesting comparison: Onesimus means useful and St. Paul wants to say he now lives up to his name and became valuable for both of them.
- St. Paul sent him back to Philemon so that he may witness the transformation for himself.
- If Onesimus had caused Philemon sorrow when he was an unbeliever, it is now time for Philemon to experience the goodness of his former slave’s renewed life.

Doing well:

- He wants to give Philemon the chance to do well by his own will and not by force.
- Here St. Paul imitates Christ.
- God does not force us to do what is right, but allows us to exercise our own good will.
- He supports us with His grace and walks with us along the way but without forcing us to follow His way.

Understanding God's Wisdom:

- God's children know that He fills their life with many opportunities from which they can benefit.
- Philemon should ask himself why God allowed Onesimus to rob him then run away.
- God changed the escape of Onesimus into an opportunity to transform him from a slave to a brother who would be joined with Philemon in an eternal bond.
- Note that he cares for Onesimus' feelings, in which he didn't use the word "escaped" but rather "departed from you."

St. Paul will pay for him:

❖ *Philemon 1:18-19*

"I consider Onesimus as **myself** and that is why I ask you to **accept** him without hesitation and I will return what he may have stolen from you. He is my **peer**, so consider **myself** as **him**. A guarantor and **payer** for him. He says, 'But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. 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."