

## **#17. THE LETTER TO PHILEMON**

1. **Philemon** was a wealthy member of the church in Colosse. Paul has written to his dear friend Philemon with hopes of achieving forgiveness for Onesimus, a runaway slave who has been converted under Paul's ministry. Paul also makes an appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus not just as a returned slave, but also as a brother in Christ. The church in Colosse met in the house of Philemon (verse 2).
  
2. **Author and date** - Paul wrote this letter in about 60AD during his first imprisonment in Rome. This was about the same time Ephesians and Colossians was written.
  - Slavery was widespread in the Roman empire. Though there is no specific condemnation of the practice in Scripture, history credits the influence of Christian principles as the primary cause of slavery's cessation. William Wilberforce appealed to Christianity's moral values to abolish slavery within Great Britain, and the Abolitionist churches in antebellum America waged war on the institution of slavery. In the Roman Empire, Saint Telemachus was largely responsible for the end of the gladiatorial fights (which were linked to the business of slavery) in Rome. According to Theodoret (an early church historian), Saint Telemachus was a monk who tried to stop a gladiatorial fight in a Roman amphitheater and was stoned to death by the crowd. Other reports say he was stabbed by one of the gladiators. As a result, Emperor Honorius was impressed by the monk's courageous martyrdom and it spurred him to issue a historic ban on gladiatorial fights. The last known gladiatorial event in Rome was on January 1st, 404AD which is consequently designated as the date of Telemachus' martyrdom. The significance of Onesimus' case is that Paul reinforced the idea that slaves who were Christians were to be treated as equals in the community of faith. The same argument would be made in other Pauline writings, but Philemon is the first to deal with a specific scenario.
  
3. **Paul's emphasis** is a personal appeal to Philemon for leniency on Onesimus' behalf. Paul is reminding Philemon of their past friendship, and is almost *calling in a favor* from his colleague.
  
4. **Key Verse**
  - **Philemon 1:15, 16 NLT** "It seems you lost Onesimus for a while so that you could have him back forever. He 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."

## 5. Key People

- **Philemon** - a wealthy Christian merchant in the city of Colosse.
- **Paul** - is nearing the end of his ministry. He led Philemon to the Lord while in ministry near the region of Colosse.
- **Onesimus** - a runaway slave who, in an effort to *do the right thing*, turned himself into his master to answer for a possibly terminal offense. He is mentioned in Colossians 4:9.

## 6. Key Place

- **Colosse** - an ancient city about 12 miles southeast of Laodicea. It was on the great road from Ephesus to the Euphrates River.

## 7. Key Themes

- **Forgiveness** - Paul was asking Philemon to model the gospel by showing grace to repentant Onesimus. Though the runaway slave was guilty, Paul is asking his friend to show mercy and favor.
- **Social Awareness** - this is a point easily misunderstood and misapplied, and I must caution against the idea of a *social gospel*. However, we must realize that social justice and protection was a strong message of the Minor Prophets. They did not call for unqualified economic equality or redistribution of wealth, but they did make a case for social justice and equal economic opportunity.

## 8. The Contents of Philemon

- **Greetings to Philemon (1:1-3)**
- **The Importance of Forgiveness (1:4-7)**
- **Paul's Appeal for Onesimus (1:8-18)**
- **The Appeal to Philemon's Kindness (1:19-25)**

### **Worth noting about Paul's Letters to Philemon**

- Paul has been criticized as being somewhat manipulative in his appeal to Philemon by bringing up their past and the spiritual debt of Philemon to Paul. The actuality is that this letter is between two very close friends who probably understand the *boundaries* of their relationship. Considering the approval of the Holy Spirit is upon the letter, we must assume the exchange was consistent with the level of their friendship.
- Slavery in the Greco-Roman world was not generally based upon race, but usually upon birth and economics.
- The logical supposition is that this private letter was read privately by Philemon before becoming a public part of the church reading. The acceptance of this letter into the life of the church portends a favorable ending for Onesimus.

### **When reading Philemon:**

- Remember that the letter to the Colossians and this letter to Philemon were delivered by Tychichus and Onesimus himself (Colossians 4:7-9; Philemon 12).
- Remember that slavery, though certainly a moral evil, was an accepted part of the ancient world. A slave in Rome had no rights. Onesimus was literally taking his life into his own hands by returning to his master.